



Bonds Beyond Boundaries

My life in my words

USHA VISVANATH

Foreword

We tend to take our mothers and what they say for granted. And our mother, Usha Visvanath, the heroine of this real-life story, has always had a lot of anecdotes and stories to narrate. Often, friends who visited her would come away fascinated by her experiences and would ask her to write it. While talking has always been easy for her – the flow of words is unstoppable; writing is too much of an effort. For both of us, having listened to her stories since childhood, it seemed repetitive and unremarkable. Still, the idea was humming in our heads. We knew it was doable, but the question was “when and how?” This question was answered when Lavanya Prasad, a storyteller entered our lives and asked incisive questions and elicited interesting stories. Suddenly, the same stories were infused with enthusiasm, and as the project progressed, it became a labour of love.

The format and innovative style were totally new to us. We had two sessions every week with Lavanya Prasad who set the context for what she wanted to know about our mother’s life. Sometimes the questions were asked in advance, so that we could put on our thinking caps and ponder over them. All this was done in a very informal manner. Notes were taken and some sessions were recorded. Still, it never felt like a Question & Answer session or interview. We were there to moderate the sessions and ensure that our mother didn’t meander and go off track. Often, we’d interject with our own memories and stories. On a weekly basis the writeup was reviewed/rewritten and edited. It has been a journey of enjoyable collaboration and learning.

At 87 our mother has more to look back on than to look forward to. But she has the same zest for life and affection for the people around her. That she’s a “people’s person” comes through clearly in her life’s story. She has imbibed principles and values from many people; and in turn, many have been influenced by her helpful approach and attitude. As you traverse through the pages of this book, you’ll witness the flowering of a young girl who went from a small flat in Bombay to a luxurious lifestyle in Waltair, then to the jungles of Assam, and finally to Bangalore. In every place and during every phase of her journey she has adapted and contributed to the community she lived in. Her popularity stems from the fact that she sees only the good in everyone and is non-judgemental. Even before we began chronologically arranging the chapters of her life, we knew that the section on testimonials from family and friends would be the longest one!

While we’ve tried to ensure the accuracy of the dates, names of people, and happenings in her life, there are some blurry areas. Also,

memories get coloured by feelings; often the good times get exaggerated or embellished. But it's not as though all the olden days were golden. She did go through some rough patches, but she overcame those by philosophising that she is not the only one. Occasionally, the incidents go back and forth in time, but that's how the mosaic of memories is pieced together.

This book is dedicated to her grandchildren, great grandchildren and future generations. It is important for them to know about the life and times of the matriarch of our family – Usha Visvanath. They must learn from the past, enrich their present, and build their future. Her experiences and valuable insights will inspire and motivate them to lead happy and successful lives; and more importantly, to make the world a better place.

Blessed to be her daughters,

Sharada and Sujata

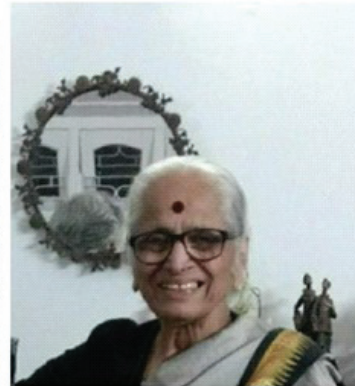
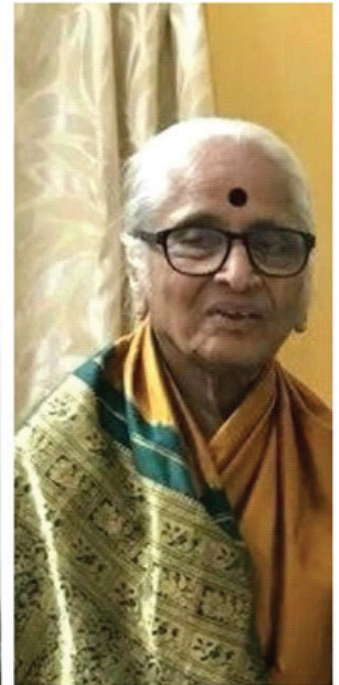
Lavanya Speaks

Hello everyone! I am truly glad to have played a small yet significant role in bringing “Bonds Beyond Boundaries” to you all. I as a storyteller believe that the shortest distance between any two people is a story. Stories are how people connect and it’s through one such connection that this project happened. I was invited by Sujata’s company to train her employees in the “Art of using Stories in the Workplace,” and over a casual conversation post the workshop, I mentioned my project “Roots” with senior citizens to Sujata. “Roots” is all about getting to know your legacy, eliciting and documenting the life experiences of elders in your family that can be passed on as a “Story Heirloom” to the younger generation and the generations to come. To know your roots, water and nurture them is an important aspect of anybody’s identity. Project Roots aims at helping the younger generation connect to their roots through the elders in the family. One thing led to another and there I was in Usha aunty’s house briefing the process to her daughters. It was decided that “Bonds Beyond Boundaries” will be made. If meeting and talking with the main person is one thing, family support is another. I must applaud the sincerity with which both Sharada and Sujata helped alongside making sure to get the names and dates correct, collect pictures and testimonials from family and friends, that adds a lot of value to this book. Every time I work with elders talking to them and eliciting stories from their life, a part of me is healed and enlightened through their wisdom. Like many others whose life has been touched by Usha aunty’s kindness, mine is too. My heart is full and I am deeply grateful to have been the person to bring this to you all. Thank you for your trust in my abilities. I hope Usha aunty’s experiences light up your lives too. Over to Mrs. Usha Visvanath.

⌘ **Concept and Structure:**
Lavanya Prasad, Telescope

⌘ **Valuable Inputs:**
Sujata Ojha

⌘ **Moderator and Editor:**
Sharada Prahladrao



Preamble

Resilience and hope. That is the reason I am here writing this today. In the early 1900s, when a cure had not yet been found for the dreadful smallpox virus that hit the human population, my Dada (father) was born in a village near Hassan called Mandagere in 1902. As a newborn he had contracted the smallpox virus. Fearing contact transmission and assuming that he would not survive he was thrown in the cowshed. Had it not been for the courage of my father's paternal aunt who took the baby with her, my father would not have survived, and I would not be here telling you this story. Isn't that intriguing?

I am Usha, daughter of Nanjappa and Subbalakshmi, wife of Visvanath and the mother of my three children. But beyond this there are many other factors that have directed the course of my life and I wish to share them with all of you.



Starting Point: The Mandagere House

Chapter 1: Bombay Meri Jaan

My Early Days in Bombay



Radha Bhuvan

Growing up I remember my father working as a ticket collector in the Indian Railways. We lived in a small flat in Bombay, Radha Bhuvan (then called Kanti Bhuvan), in Hindu Colony, Dadar. I was their third child after my sister Gayatri and brother Bhagwat Swaroop (called Bhagwan), who were born in my grandparents' house. My birth was indeed a special one for I was the first child in the family to be born in the Railway Hospital in Bhusawal, Maharashtra on the 8th of May 1937. It was a normal delivery, and I was a healthy 9-pound baby. I am told our entire family had come to Bombay to see the first "hospital" baby in the family.

The extended family always used to come over to help and support during times like these. With two older children it was impossible for my mother to look after a newborn. My father's sisters (unmarried then), Ramachandra Kaka and Sarada Ayi, all were our support system. It was only natural for the children to get attached to them, so much so that when Kaka and Ayi left for Bangalore, my brother went and sat in the train with them, refusing to get down. It might sound strange to you all, but since they did not have any children, my father did not object and my brother Bhagwan, grew up as their child in Bangalore. He came back to Bombay only after his Engineering, for employment. In fact, my sister and I refused to believe he was our own brother because he could not speak Marathi as fluently as we could! But he proved us wrong by mastering not only Marathi but 10 other languages, probably a gene that he inherited from our mother Subbu.

Subbalakshmi/Subbu/Dodda Subbu - My Mother

Can you imagine a 12-year-old girl to be married and shoulder responsibilities as a wife, managing a home? Well, Subbu did. Married to my father (who was then 25) at the tender age of 12, she came to live with him in Nasik at the age of 13, absolutely unaware of anything that had to do with managing a home. The young brides of those days were expected to adapt and learn as quickly as possible. I remember my mother telling me that she simply sat in one corner of the house, not knowing what to do, when my father went to the office on the first day. After some time, a person came and delivered a “dabba” to her. She didn’t even know what a dabba meant! So she had kept it aside and was waiting for my father to return home. My father came back to see a hungry 13-year-old sitting in one corner and told her that the “dabba” had food for her. In the place where she grew up there was no concept of dabba at all. Everything was new to her, the language, the bustling life of a big city, but she managed to not only learn the languages Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi and Tamil but also made friends, and created a loving community of neighbours. By being a living example, she taught us the greatest values in life. Only my sister Shobha and brother Ananta called her Amma, all the others called her Subbu, including her older grandchildren.

In the building opposite ours lived a Maharashtrian family, the father had a clerical job, with a meagre salary which was not enough to manage his huge family. I remember Subbu sometimes made extra food and asked us to go and give it to them, saying that food should not be wasted. Not only that, but she also gave our clothes to them, when they were in pretty good condition. And we as children learnt to share and care without even realising what we were doing. It was a part and parcel of our everyday life. Today I feel happy that the family is still in touch with us. Some of us even visited them during our trip to Bombay.

Our house was on the ground floor and the doors of the house were always open. Can you imagine doing that now? Right next to the door was a cupboard with a mirror. I fondly remember how everyone who came down from the floors above, would stop by our house, look into the mirror, quickly do a touch up or adjust their sarees or shirts and then leave for work. There was one akka that I remember who used to wear the saree with the “kacche” and it would be

amusing to us as children to see her adjusting her saree in front of the mirror before she stepped outside; and none of us complained about them using “our mirror.” Nowadays, I find it strange to see people fighting over parking lots, etc! While Subbu was the one who bound us with love, my father was a strict disciplinarian.

Nanjappa/Dada - My Father

Starting off as a ticket collector, he moved up the ladder and held good positions in the Indian Railways before his retirement. Since Dada had a transferable job, it was decided that the family would stay back in Bombay. It made complete sense, with six school going children it was impossible for the entire family to shift every time my father was transferred. Subbu gave birth to twin girls after me, Chandrika and Jyotsna of which the fair and healthy one, Chandrika lived only up to eight months. Jyotsna was a fragile baby who took a long time to walk, run and talk. After this I had two more siblings - Shobha and Ananta. And so, Dada’s decision of us staying back in Bombay, was right.



He was a disciplinarian, not only with us but also with the kids in the neighbourhood. One cannot imagine disciplining the kids of our neighbours in today’s times, why, not even one’s own children! On the first floor of our building lived a Maharashtrian family, who had a son of my age. He was a healthy boy, well built. We were playing *chor-police* that day and he climbed on top of the mango tree (to hide) that was beside our glass-spiked compound wall. Due to his weight, the branch broke, and he fell right on the spikes which pierced through his hand. My father did first aid, took him to the hospital for a tetanus injection, brought him back home and beat him left and right for being so foolish. Such were his ways of disciplining and no one dared to question him!

*Standing left to right: Shobha, Jyotsna, Usha and Gayatri
Sitting left to right: Bhagwan, Dada, Subbu and Ananta, 1992*

Dada was very good at Astrology and his predictions have come true too. He believed in horoscopes and the stars. A Tamilian family had once shown Dada a prospective alliance's horoscope for their daughter. Dada must've found something amiss, so he said that the horoscopes don't match. Still, they decided to go ahead with the wedding. But within a year of the wedding the groom died. Despite knowing things like this, Dada never said anything bluntly, but put forth his concerns in a polished way. The family later realised his good intentions.

Schooling

Dada had an assistant who did all the formalities of school admission and paying fees. I don't remember Dada coming to our school for anything at all! Gayatri, Jyotsna and I went to a girls convent popularly known as the Portuguese Church School, an English medium school that was in Dadar West. Shobha also studied with us till we finished school and then went to English High School. Jyotsna was not academically inclined, so Dada enrolled her in a dance school. There she shone and gave a few stage performances. We lived in Dadar East and so we had to walk a long distance, crossing the railway bridge to reach our school. There were no electric streetlights then, we only had gas lamps. A man used to climb up the ladder to light the lamp every evening. This probably occurred around 7 pm and that was our deadline to return home.

Since we were girls, after we got our periods, we were allowed to go in a bus, considering that we may feel tired. But I remember all of us trying to save some money by walking on some days so that we could spend it on erasers, pencils or ink. Each one was given only one pencil per month. And the ink was not like how it is today. A man used to mix a powder with water and put it in a bottle for us. That was ink in



*Gayatri, Jyotsna and Usha with a friend
(tall girl in the centre)*

those days! So any money that we saved, used to go towards pampering ourselves with an extra pencil, ink or eraser. Such were the times!

Gayatri and I used to resemble each other so much that people got confused - even the teachers! Most of the time, teachers thought that Gayatri had failed when they saw me in their class. This continued even later in our lives when we lived in Yelahanka - shopkeepers delivered the ordered items to the wrong house.

Summer vacations during school days were fun. Dada made sure that we were completely occupied. There was an open field next to our building that we called “Vyayam School” where martial arts were taught from 8 to 10 am. It was a daily routine that we had to follow, to keep ourselves fit. In the evenings we went to a college library where Hindi tuitions were held and also attended a session on how to make pen friends and write letters to them. Thanks to these classes I had many pen friends. A boy Kiran from Kashmir, two girls from London - Mary and Lucille and a girl from Germany. Out of these, Mary and I were in touch with each other until my children were born. She sent dresses and toys for my kids. There was even a hospital that had tied up with the summer camp and taught us how to do first aid. I learnt how to draw blood, give injections and even administer an IV. All these came in handy later when I went to Assam, especially during the Assam floods. I also took up teacher’s training during the summer camp, which later laid the foundation for “Tiny Tots” in Assam.

Saturdays and Sundays were special because we could ride cycles for 2 annas. Dada made sure that we utilised even our vacations in the most useful way. If not for our disciplinarian dad, I don’t think we would have learnt all these skills. Those days girls were not given the same opportunities as boys, but Dada made sure that his daughters learnt martial arts, and many other things just like the boys. He indeed was a forward-thinking person.

After Dada’s retirement, we saw roles change in our household. Subbu became the boss of the house and Dada invariably listened to her. An incident that I vividly recall is when Gayatri’s third child was due, she had to be rushed to the hospital due to some complications. Dada, who believed in astrology, was looking at the *panchanga* (almanac) and was hoping that the child would be delivered at the right time under the right star. This irritated Subbu and she snapped at

Dada “Can’t you see our daughter is suffering. Is this the time for your astrology?” and I saw Dada go quiet. Subbu never spoke, unless needed and when she did, Dada invariably listened.

Vacations in Mysore

Sometimes during our vacations we visited our grandparents in Mysore. We hated going there because of the rural lifestyle and how we were expected to behave. Even though we lived in a small house in Bombay we had toilets in the house. And in the village it was always by the river. Our grandparents followed “madi and aacharam.” There were certain rules to be followed. Girls were not allowed to sit in the “jagli” (sitout) that was facing the road. If boys came to play “jhula” (swings) girls were not allowed to sit on it. And we “Bombay girls” as they used to call us always wore skirts and dresses in contrast to the *langa* that the village girls wore. We never wore glass bangles, bindi or flowers much to the dismay of the elders.

Even though we had respect for our elders in the family, we preferred to stay in Bombay rather than visit Mysore mainly because of these restrictions! Girls during their periods were not even allowed to come in front of others in the village, whereas in Bombay we went to school, mingled with people in the family (could be because in a small flat it was impossible for my mother to follow the “madi” that her parents followed). I think the right word to use here will be adaptation. We all learnt to adapt well to our modern surroundings, especially my mother.

I recall a funny incident about adapting to new things. Bombay was more developed as compared to most other cities in India. Being a port it had good occupancy and influence of the British and so it was one of the first cities where everything British came into existence. Brassiere (bra) - was an item that aroused curiosity. Until then we managed to wear a camisole of sorts, made of cotton cloth that was stitched at home. Like I mentioned, Subbu adapted really well to changes and so one day she decided to go to a local shop to buy bras for us. What she didn’t know was that she needs to know the size before buying a bra. She thought it was scandalous if someone, that too a stranger, asked a woman her bust size! So she was taken aback when the shopkeeper asked for the same. And she said, “Ayyo, how can you ask such a question?” The shopkeeper realised that Subbu was not aware of the sizes and used his hands to show the sizes (small,

medium and large). That was it, she stormed out of the shop saying “Shiva Shiva, where is the world heading?” But later talking to Ayi who had been to America and was aware of all these developments, Subbu understood that the bust size is important in choosing a bra for anyone, but this time she went to a different shop. Because she couldn’t face the shopkeeper again after creating such a hue and cry!

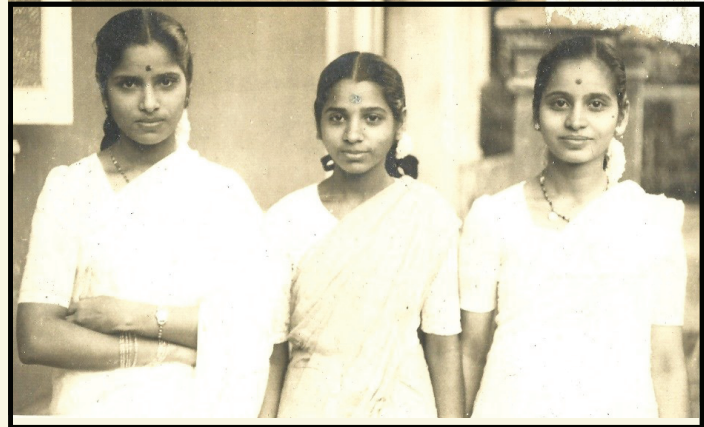
Proxy Bride

You would have heard of giving proxy to your friends in schools and colleges. But have you heard of a proxy bride?! Well, I was one!

My parents were looking for an alliance for my sister Gayatri and when one got finalised, the groom’s side wanted to see the bride. Gayatri couldn’t go because of her 11th (Metric) standard exams. Voila! Our striking resemblance came in handy. Dada told me that I would be the proxy bride going to the groom’s village. And did I have a choice? No!

It wasn’t easy for me either, because I had to for the very first time, tie a saree, plait my hair into a single plait (I was only used to two plaits), wear jewellery, bangles, flowers etc. We always wore shoes in Bombay and for the first time I had to wear sandals. It took time to get used to the new sandals and I was limping due to the sores. There were no rehearsals of any sort, mind you! So all the while in the train, I was being given instructions by Dada, to walk straight and not make a fuss about anything and keep the saree intact!

We reached the village in the evening and we stayed in my father’s cousin’s house. His wife helped me adjust the saree and get ready again to go and meet the groom’s family. While the groom’s family were informed that I was not Gayatri, the villagers had no clue. So



Left to right: Usha, Jyotsna and Gayatri

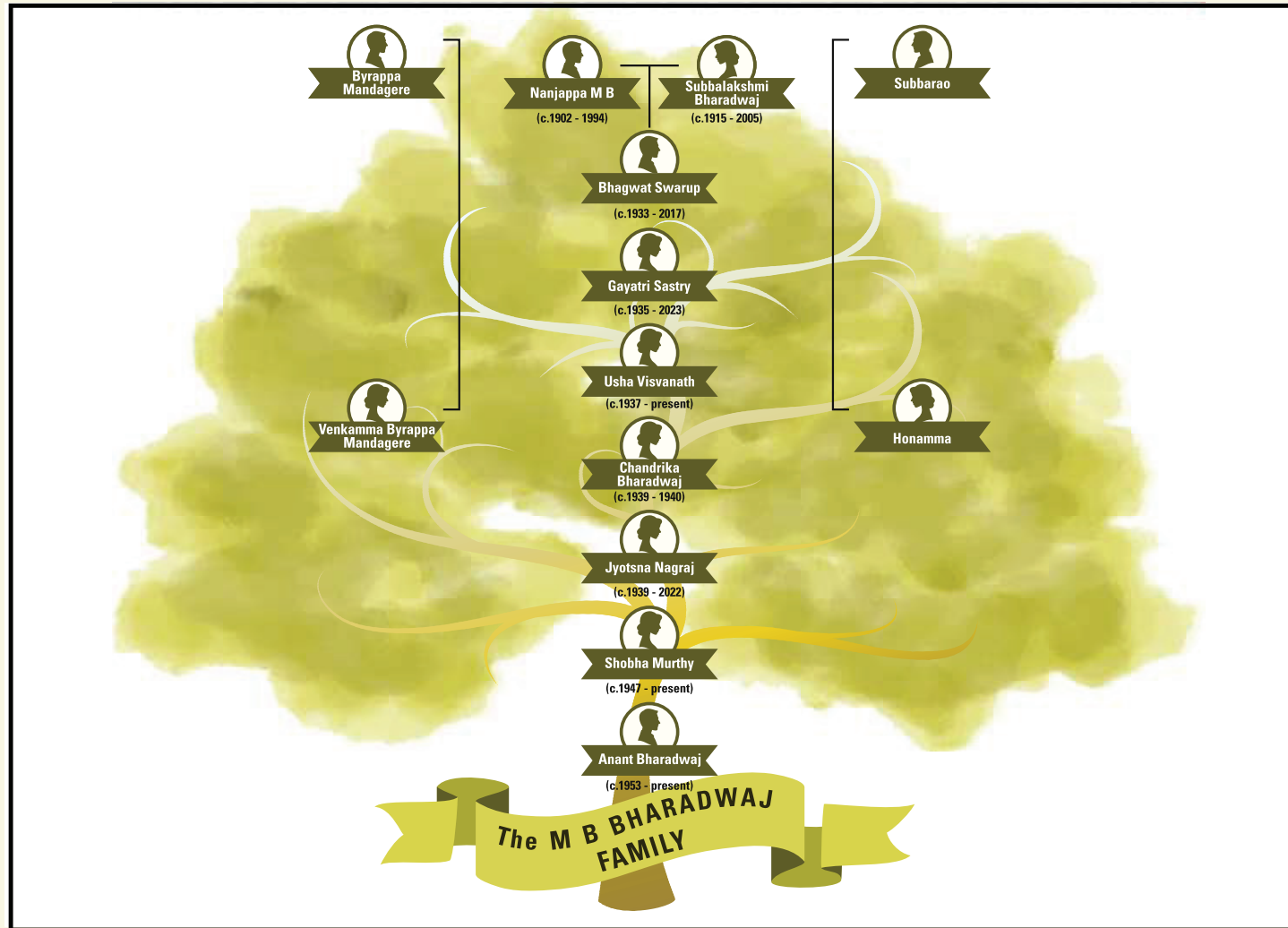
the moment I stepped out there was a huge crowd waiting to see me, the bride-to-be. To get so much attention was indeed overwhelming! And all the while my father was telling me not to ask to go to the toilet. And I was wondering why. Later I found out that there were no toilets in the house and one had to relieve oneself by the river or fields.

I was feeling sorry for my sister, who would have to face all this. I was worried as to how she would manage without a toilet. To adjust to village life takes time, especially when you come from a city like Bombay. The cow dung wiped floors, the river and field toilets take a long time to adjust to. But like I mentioned earlier, we all learnt to adapt, adjust and lead a happy life. But once Gayatri came to the house as a new bride, her father-in-law built a toilet for the “Bombay bride.”



Left to right: Shobha, Jyotsna, Usha and Gayatri

My Bhava (Gayatri’s husband), who became a bhava to all, fondly recalled how when he had come to Bombay to work (in a company called Garlic and Co.) he had the golden opportunity to take my sister for a walk (this was before their wedding) and how I was the “kabab mein haddi!” But let me tell you I had no intentions of going with the lovebirds. My sister insisted that she would go only if I went with them. But my mother saved me from further embarrassment by giving me some coins and asked me to excuse myself after a while saying I have to buy vegetables for the house. These are fond memories that drew us closer.



Chapter 2: U turn

Have you heard of the phrase 180-degree shift? On life's journey we encounter many such shifts. Let me share a few that I have witnessed and experienced. The first differences that I noticed was between Dada and Ramachandra Kaka. While my dad was a strict disciplinarian, who imposed rules, my Kaka was the opposite. Any naughty or annoying behaviour that we children demonstrated would be dealt with utmost kindness and concern. He would make us sit and explain lovingly, why we shouldn't do it. Maybe that is why all the children were very fond of Ramachandra Kaka and Sarada Ayi.

Oh! Their wedding story is something that you all should know. It's all about God's mysterious ways. Our grandfather Byrappa and all the other people in my grandfather's household were truly excited about the wedding that was about to take place. My dear Kaka was getting married. The bride's people had all arrived in bullock carts to our place, and as per the custom in our house, a few people from the bride's side would apply *arshana* (haldi) to the groom. And during the ceremony, someone noticed a white spot on Kaka's hip, assumed it was leprosy, and called off the wedding. My grandfather Byrappa announced that if anybody is willing to get their daughter married to his son, it would take place in the same premises.

And that is how Ayi (Sarada) came into our family. It was only later we came to know of her story.

The day Sarada was born, her mother died (in childbirth). Ayi's father, while performing the cremation of her dead mother, had decided to throw the newborn into the fire, not willing to take care of her. Coincidentally, a man who had come for another cremation in the same grounds that day took the baby with him. He was the priest in the Mysore palace and Ayi was brought up by this large-hearted man as his own daughter. Since he was in the Mysore palace, the then King of Mysore had given him sarees, jewellery etc. as *sanmana* (reward), for his good deeds, which he saved for Ayi's wedding.

In the year 1945, Kaka had to go to the US. The journey was by ship and it took three full months to reach America. Ayi, who knew only Kannada, utilised the three months on the ship to read, write and learn conversational English, and



Kaka and Ayi

shorthand and typewriting with Kaka's help. In America, while Kaka was busy with his office work, Ayi would use the guidebook and go around.

A Hindu woman (Indians were called Hindus by the Americans then) standing at the bus stop wearing a saree was indeed an eyecatcher! Ayi used to tell us about American women who would walk up to her and say "what a waste" showing the 6 yards of cloth covering her body. And Ayi promptly told them about the many other uses of the saree and how in India everything was put to use perfectly. She was a proud Indian, never missing a chance to talk about India with pride. Another incident is when the Americans asked her if the rumour they heard about snakes and elephants being seen on Indian roads was true, and

she asked them if the rumour about the high divorce rate in the USA was true too! She was quick on the repartee. When asked if she had seen the Taj Mahal, she asked, "Have you seen the Statue of Liberty, Central Park or the White House?"

I still remember the day when they came back to India, after three years. India had got freedom then. All the passengers stood on the deck and sang our National Anthem. Later when they went back to Bangalore, Ayi was asked by the All India Radio to speak about her experiences in the US, and how well she delivered a speech in English that day! Gayatri and I who witnessed it truly believed the phrase "God has his own plan for each one of us." Else, how can a child who was going to be thrown into the fire turn out to be an inspiration to all of us?

Both Ayi and Kaka were followers of Gandhiji. They believed in *ahimsa* and the principles of Gandhiji. Their association with Gandhiji started during the freedom movement when the freedom fighters who were considered criminals by the British were hunted by the army. To prevent themselves from getting caught, Indian Freedom fighters were always on the run and they were given shelter in some houses. Many such people had stayed with Kaka and Ayi in their Malleshwaram house, who influenced them greatly. They had subscribed to a paper called *Harijan* that spoke about the Swadeshi movement, self-sustenance, wearing Indian dresses, using natural medicines and discarding anything that

was foreign. In fact they were considered more Gandhian than Gandhiji himself! They frequently visited the Wardha Ashram and participated in the meetings held near their house. They also were staunch followers of Ramakrishna Mutt, Swami Shivananda and Mator Krishna murthy. Subbanna Kaka (my father's youngest brother) who was an M.Sc. Gold medallist and considered the most brilliant in the family, was introduced to Gandhiji through Ramachandra Kaka. It was here that he met Rukmini, a child widow from Andhra. Subbanna Kaka married Rukmini in the ashram and I had a chance to attend the wedding.

We loved to attend weddings, dreaming about the delicacies that would be served. We did not get to eat sweets and savoury everyday like how everything today is available at the click of a button. So when we were told that we were going to attend a wedding, I made Gayatri promise to share her sweet with me! But when we went there we realised it was a very simple wedding. There were not even garlands, the bride and the groom exchanged the *charka* threads as garlands, and lunch was simple dal roti with a piece of bella (jaggery)! Kaka and Ayi participated in the Quit India Movement too. They even took a vow of celibacy, taking into consideration the economic status and the protection of the joint family. Kaka and Ayi's lifestyle and values influenced me very much. When Kaka had to go to Russia on work, Ayi stayed with us in Bombay and appeared for the Visharad exams (highest certification for Hindi). The certificates for these were handed over by Gandhiji at Juhu beach. There was a huge crowd gathered to see Gandhiji, but my sister and I were not impressed to

see an old man who needed two girls by his side to support him and never wore shirts. When Ayi's name was called both Gayatri and I accompanied her. It was at that time that Gandhiji spoke to us. He looked into my eyes and said "Aap Acche Kaam Karo" (you do good work). Maybe it was a *Satya vachan*, today I am associated with the Arsikere Ashram and volunteer for social causes. Kaka's work was even recognized by the Government of India and he was awarded the Padma Bhushan. I accompanied Kaka and Ayi to Delhi for the ceremony. There was a rehearsal the previous day which



Padma Bhushan Awarded to Kaka

I witnessed and on the day of the award function, Ayi accompanied him. It was a proud moment for all of us.

Anna/ Nanjundiah - My Father-in-law

Kaka was a Geologist and taught at the Vizag University (then known as Andhra University). It was then that he got acquainted with Mr. Saligrama Nanjundiah, the first Indian to become the Chairman of the Visakhapatnam port trust. Nanjundiah was an exceptionally brilliant student and a man of great values. Born into poverty, studying by streetlights, doing *vaara* (asking for and invariably having dinner in Brahmin households), fighting off a cruel stepmother, he took his B.E. degree in 1923 from Sir M. Visweshariah, the Dewan of Mysore and one of the world's greatest engineers.

Those days the trains connecting the North and the South of India halted at the Vizag station then known as the Waltair



Demure Usha poses for a studio snap

station. Daily a peon was sent to the station after the train departed to ensure that no one was stranded there. Because the next train was only the following day! In case anyone was stranded, the peon was instructed to bring them home. Nanjundiah had a palatial house with many rooms in it. His wife Sarada was also equally hospitable and generous. Their son Visvanath was a student of Geology and Kaka was his professor. It was through Kaka that this marriage alliance came for me. Both sides were happy since Kaka was a mutual connection. However, my mother-in-law had passed away a few years before our wedding. The groom's family had relatives in Bombay, who took care of the engagement and the wedding arrangements. The marriage was conducted at Bhagini Samaj - a ground next to our house in Dadar. The same ground that I used to go to by jumping over the compound wall! I remember people jokingly saying that the

bride would come to her wedding by jumping over the compound wall. And with all glory and grandeur, in the year 1956, I became the daughter-in-law of the Nanjundiah household. My youngest brother Ananta insisted he would come with me to my new home. The elders in the family had to convince and cajole him to let me go.

Waltair Days

And then came a U turn in my life. From the noisy, buzzing city living in a small flat, I moved to a quiet, laidback palatial house in Waltair post my wedding. I was surprised to see that there were many household helpers to do all our chores unlike Bombay where we had to manage everything. My father-in-law was respected for his work ethics, integrity and philanthropic approach. In 1944 he was conferred the title of Rao Bahadur (Rao means King and Bahadur means



Sujata at the Sarada Mahila Samajam, Vizag

Brave) the highest honour to an Indian civilian by the British Government for outstanding service or acts of public welfare. Some highlights of his career were manning the port on the day of the Japanese bombing (April 07, 1942); first Indian Administrator of any Port in India (1945) i.e. two years before Independence); Visakhapatnam declared as one of the four major ports of India (1957); and Chairman of the Minor Ports of India (1949-51). Despite so many achievements under his belt, he was a very down-to-earth person. My mother-in-law knew only Kannada and Telugu and had a heart of gold. She started a Mahila Samajam for music and tailoring classes and was a radio artiste too. I was told about their warm hospitality

to people who were stranded at the Waltair station, two of which I must share here.

The Mazumdar family was from Kolkata. My father-in-law met them at the local hospital. He went on hospital rounds every now and then, to check if he could be of help to anyone. That is when he found the Mazumdars who had come from Kolkata to attend to their son who was being treated at the Vizag hospital. He was a pilot with the Indian Army and his plane had met with an accident. With the language and place being new, the Mazumdars were struggling. My father-in-law brought them home and they stayed for three months until their son recovered completely. Every day my mother-in-law, while sitting for her puja, would recite the Ramayana in Telugu to the Bengali lady, praying for her

wounded son. I don't know what Mrs. Shudha Mazumdar understood, but she went on to write the Ramayana in English! But the family was so grateful and thankful to my father-in-law's family that later when my husband and I had gone to Kolkata, we were invited by them to their house and she even gifted me a pair of gold bangles, which I have now given to my two daughters.

The other was a Tamilian family, who had two sons and a daughter. They too were taken care of by my father-in-law and later became a part of our family. The family willingly gave their son in marriage to my father-in-law's niece. They were not worried about the differences in language/State. The very fact that the bride was a part of my father-in-law's family sufficed.



Wedding Reception

*Left to right: Seethamma, SR Rao, S. Nanjundiah,
Pramila and Lalitha*

Despite being held in such high esteem in Waltair, my father-in-law was a very simple down-to-earth person, who sometimes bent the rules by which he lived just to make his family happy. Like the time he attended the party that was organised in the Waltair Club (of which he was the president), after our wedding. He was there for a few minutes at the party and quietly went back home excusing himself. It was only later I realised that my father-in-law did not drink alcohol or eat outside food. But he had joined the party just to make us, the newlyweds, happy.

He became very excited that I was going to be a mother and requested my parents to let me stay in his house for a few days before my delivery. Subbu, who until then had not seen my in-law's house, was surprised to see the amount of care and pampering that I was given. At one point

she scolded me that I should be doing some work around the house in order to have an easy delivery. To go to the beach close to the house, my father-in-law asked me to go in the car. When he came to my maternal home in Dadar to see the newborn, he never complained. Subbu, who knew how he lived in Waltair, was impressed to see how easily he adjusted



No.3, Harbour Park

in the Bombay flat. He went back home happy that we named our daughter after his wife, my husband's mother, Sharada.

My father-in-law retired in the month of August '58. But soon his health deteriorated and in December '58, when Sharada was just four months old, he passed away. Visvanath was in Digboi when my father-in-law died and he received the message only after ten days. His uncle did all the rituals and the rites for the deceased and continued to do so even after my husband returned. Certain things that

people do for us in our lives can never

be repaid. This was one such, to be there to take care of my father-in-law's last rites when my husband was away. My husband was indebted to him and financially supported his uncle until his last days.

Waltair was where I learnt a lot about selflessness, mutual respect and gratitude. This was mainly by observing my father-in-law, the stories I heard about my mother-in-law, and the people whom I met in this beautiful place.

Krishnamurthy was the cook in my father-in-law's home. He was a Tamilian Brahmin and was revered and treated like a family member. All of us who visited my father-in-law's house always touched his feet and took his blessings before we left. There was no discrimination when it came to respecting people.

Belliappa was a selfless and kind-hearted person who came into our lives through my sister-in-law Pramila. Pramila had a Coorgi friend called Sara who used to stay with them during her college days in Waltair. Sara's sister Kaveri and her husband Beliappa also grew close to the family. Decades later, when Sara's family had gone on a road trip, their car met with an accident and only her son-in-law and grandson survived. Belliappa had a very good rapport with us and used to visit us in our Yelahanka home. He was very disciplined. He usually visited us once a month and informed us in advance about what time he would arrive and what he wanted for lunch! One day he had called to tell me he would be visiting us at 11 am and would stay on for lunch. I was in the kitchen when I noticed a car standing in front of our gate.

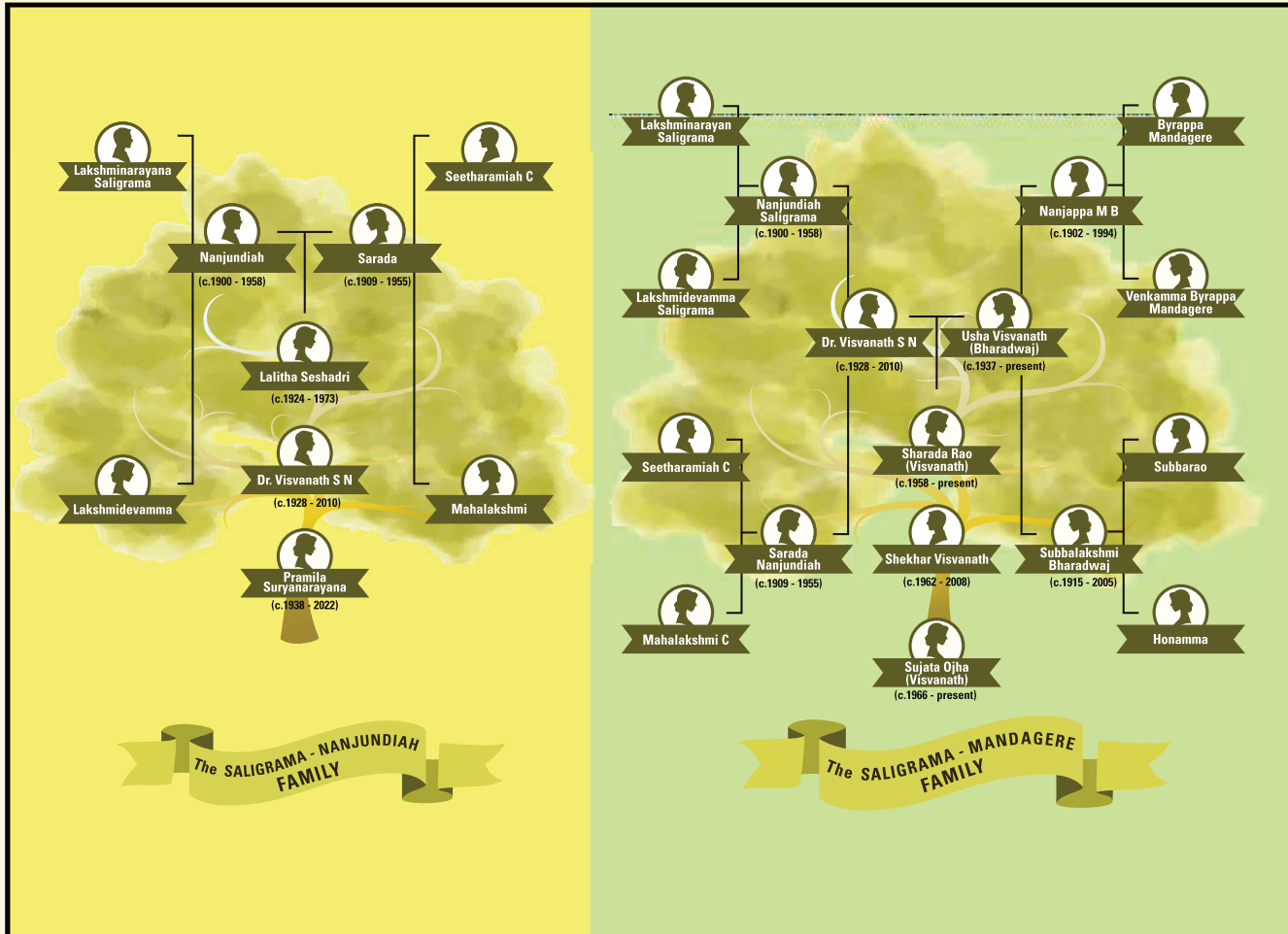
It was Belliappa! He had arrived ten minutes earlier than scheduled and was waiting to enter exactly at 11 am! I used to call my friends and neighbours home when he visited us, so that they could talk to him and interact with this wonderful person. He is now 101 years old. People like Beliappa are rare gems in this world.

Ila was my husband's Bengali friend from college who used to visit my father-in-law's house frequently during her college days. She later married a Telugu person and settled down in Waltair. But when she was in Waltair, my father-in-law was like a local guardian, helping her with everything, especially because she was far away from her family. She was someone who had experienced unconditional love and support from a local family when she was away from her own. Maybe that was why she was there for not only my children but all their schoolmates when they studied in Rishi Valley School. My children and their friends (close to 30 children in all) would inform her about their date of travel to Kolkata and give a list of items that they wanted for lunch. The train halted in Waltair station during lunch time. Ila would carry a big tiffin carrier full of food for these children and they would eat to their heart's content. This process



Sharada and Prahlad in front of S. Nanjundiah's bust, Vizag

was repeated when they had to go back to school after vacations! There was no need for Ila to do any of this, but she hadn't forgotten the love she got when she was away from her parents, and willingly did this for my children when they had to stay away from us. Such selfless acts are good values to instil in the future generations to come.



Chapter 3: Assam Calling

My husband Visvanath had applied for a job with the “Burmah Oil Company” and was waiting for the interview call. So immediately after our wedding, we went to Kolkata to Kaka’s house, and stayed there for a few days, since the Burmah Oil Company (BOC) had an office in Kolkata. There were no emails or phone facilities those days, so I remember that a messenger wearing a white uniform with a thick red belt came to Kaka’s house and gave a scroll to us. He was the messenger from BOC and he had brought news about my husband’s interview with BOC at the Grand Hotel the very next day. Today it amazes me how communication has become much faster and easier.

Visvanath had done his D.Sc (a notch higher than PhD) in France and was very fluent in French. That served as a plus point for him during the interview. There were three people on the interview panel. Two British officers and one Indian. The questions were mainly on his hobbies and extra curriculars, especially sports. One of the British officers saw in his resume that he knew French and asked him questions about sports in French. They were impressed by Visvanath’s answers delivered in impeccable French. He cleared the interview and had to go to Assam the very next day. The company had arranged for his flight from Kolkata to Assam, but I had to stay back with Kaka in Kolkata until the company made arrangements for me to join him.

That did not take long either. Within a week or 10 days, the same messenger came with my ticket to Assam.

My First Flight Experience

There were no fancy airports and rules like what we have these days. The first thing that one was told was that the weight of the luggage including your weight should not exceed 100 kgs! I was of slim build so could carry more luggage. It was an early morning flight from Kolkata to Assam. We left home at 4 am and the flight took off at 5 am.

It was a Dakota aircraft with just nine passengers and a pilot. Every half hour the flight stopped to refuel and all of us had to get down from the flight and wait until it got refuelled. There were four stops until we reached the destination. Like I said earlier there were no fancy runways like what we have today, it was a simple air strip. We all had to get down, wait for the cabin to be opened and pick up our own luggage. Conveyor belts were unheard of.

In a totally new place I stood there looking for Visvanath and couldn't spot him anywhere! There were others who had come to pick up other passengers, and I thought it's just about 10 days since we got married and have I already forgotten my husband's face? Well, he didn't come, but I spotted a man with a familiar uniform that I had seen earlier in Kolkata. He figured out that I should be Mrs. Visvanath and told me that as my husband was unable to come, someone else had come to receive me. It was my husband's colleague, a middle-aged gentleman, Mr. V.B. Rao. He was surprised to see that Mrs. Visvanath was a young girl with two plaits wearing a saree. Maybe he had expected someone older!

Since my husband was stationed in the field somewhere in the forest, he took me to his house. I remember it was just 4 in the evening and it was already dark with no streetlights. In a strange place with an unknown person, I felt a little uncomfortable. Mr. Rao reassured me that I was like a daughter to him and he had four daughters back home waiting for him. After a two hour drive we reached his home. His daughters were very happy to see me and bonded with me instantly.

Strangers Not Strangers Any More

Mrs. Rao and I bonded instantly over a card game - Bridge. She was impressed by how I was playing the game and invited a couple of British ladies home to play with me. When I won the game, Mrs. Rao was elated and threw a party, but I knew this was all beginner's luck. At the Digboi Club I also learnt to play Mahjong from the British ladies, a Chinese board game that usually only men play. I was a quick learner and later I taught all the ladies in the neighbourhood. We would play from 3 pm to 6.30 pm. Post retirement, this practice continued in Yelahanka too. We usually had one or two snacks and some tea arranged for



Digboi Club

all of us. The husbands who came to pick up their wives joined us for snacks and spent some time with us. Now my friends in Yelahanka tell me that they still play Mahjong but the snacks are missing! I have taught all my children and grandchildren the game. We even had Mahjong competitions in Duliajan and I have fond memories of winning some too. Today, at 87, I am teaching Mahjong to people in the apartment complex that I am staying in now.



Mahjong Players in Duliajan



A typical house in Duliajan



Sujata standing in front of a typical house in Digboi

In Assam the near and dear ones, i.e. the neighbours and colleagues, always helped each other. The Indian interviewer of my husband also lived in Digboi, a Maharashtrian with 11 children! I used to happily play with the children and never bothered about helping around the house. I was very well taken care of by the friendly neighbours. But all good things have to come to an end eventually. The Maharashtrian guardian sent a morse code to my husband to come over. When my husband arrived the first thing he asked was “Why did you complain?” I hadn’t. The guardian had called him from the field after he realised that I was Visvanath’s wife! We were given quarters with helpers to take care of the chores in and around the house. I had absolutely no knowledge of cooking. But Visvanath never complained. He was a jovial person with a kind heart. The kitchen was not a part of the house, it was a little further away.

A few days later, Mrs. Rao visited our house and asked for coffee. She took one sip and immediately spat it out! Since Visvanath never complained, I hadn’t bothered to learn. But Mrs. Rao would not let me get away with this! She explained to me how the coffee beans have to be roasted, ground and the powder put in a filter to get aromatic decoction that could later be used to make coffee. During my next visit to Waltair, my father-in-law was surprised that I only wanted to buy good quality coffee beans.



Usha drives the new Ambassador car

I made a lot of friends in Assam. My friends would comment that my husband never complained, unlike theirs. A jovial and friendly person, he had mastered French and was also very good at sports. He taught cricket and tennis to his friends and their children. He was also very good at writing. All the top brass in his firm would request him to draft letters to the higher officials. He gave extempore speeches and participated in debates etc. The committee at one point decided to make him the judge instead of a participant, since he bagged the prize every time!

He also encouraged me not to waste time but put all that I learnt to good use. He was not like the husbands of those days who expected their wives to be looking after them all the time. Our life in Assam was adventurous. He had to work in the middle of the forests where they had the camps. The path that had to be taken was dangerous and we were constantly warned by people as to what needs to be done if we encountered a wild animal. Visvanath and I would go for walks in the jungle. Many times we encountered situations that send a shudder down my spine even today. One such was a python that swallowed a whole deer and curved itself around the bark of a tree. We heard the bones of the deer crack in the stomach of the python. The animals are harmless if we don't trouble them. We just had to remember that we were encroaching on their territory and not vice versa.

Very often we went to the China border. It was not like what it is now, with security all the time. There used to be tents and some soldiers, who sometimes were even offered tea by our Indian soldiers. Occasionally I used to accompany my husband to the forest and spend time there. But back at home, I practiced and gained confidence to drive. Then I started taking my friends to see movies. Those were wonderful days!

Precious Friendships

Religion or caste never mattered when it came to friendships. I think that was one of the reasons why the friendships lasted and still run strong between the families. Visvanath's Assamese colleague, Handique fell in love with a Russian girl, Tanya and married her. She was a Chemical Engineer but the Russian government said that if she gives up her citizenship her degree will be derecognised and she can never visit Russia or her family again. She was torn between her family and husband. They had a baby girl named Natasha. When the baby was about 3 months old Tanya decided that she would go back to her family in Russia. I told Tanya that before leaving India she must see a



Tanya Handique

few places. So, Natasha stayed with us for about three months while Handique took Tanya to various parts of the country. Their separation was a very sad one for all of us as it was due to geopolitical reasons and government diktats. Today, both Natasha and Tanya are US citizens and keep in touch with me.

Mr. Subramaniam and family came from Andhra. They had three daughters; the wife was expecting and the whole family was praying for a son. When a daughter was born, the father was a little upset. I remember telling him that the newborn was going to be his lucky charm. The father got a promotion within three days of the child's birth and he even got a chance to go abroad. He used to tell me that my words came true and that his fourth daughter was indeed his lucky charm. Mrs. Subramaniam was a very talented and creative person. Her chutney making skills were unbeatable. Those days when there was no mixer, she used to hold the child on her hips and grind the chutney. The spiciness of the chutney would make us cough and when we told her to put the child down while grinding the chutney she used to matter-of-factly say that's how the children get used to the "Andhra Kaaram." All of us liked her chutneys. Her house used to be full of artefacts that she used to make from waste, she recycled even old medicine bottles!

Just like Sarada Ayi, there was one Dr. Ghai in Assam who became good friends with us. His story reminds us of how life always has a plan for us. During the partition time in India many families were destroyed. One such was Dr. Ghai's. Orphaned during the riots, neighbours took pity on the boy who was crying over his dead parents and brought him with them to Delhi. He grew up in the refugee camp with his foster parents, studied well and even got into a medical college. He got a job in Digboi as an Ophthalmologist. He married a girl from another refugee camp, whose parents also had passed away. It was during his service in Digboi that we became good friends. After his retirement he moved to Delhi. I had a chance to visit him in Delhi a few years ago. He was suffering from dementia then. His wife had told me that he might not remember me. But to my surprise, he not only remembered me but also spoke a lot about our old days in Assam. I was very glad that those happened to be fond memories that were etched in his heart. Dr. Ghai passed away a year later. Of his three children two are doctors, living in Canada and Delhi. The third son, who is differently abled, now takes care of the mother along with his brother in Delhi. We may give many material things to people, but what they will remember forever is how we made them feel. I was glad that I was able to share some happy moments with Dr. Ghai and his family during his last days.

Mr. and Mrs. G.L.N Ayya were our neighbours in Duliajan. At that time we were the only two Kannada speaking families. Born and brought up in Bombay, my fluency in Kannada was not that great. Mrs. Ayya honed my Kannada speaking skills. When Sujata was born, Mrs. Ayya did the cradle ceremony. Would you believe it if I told you that she also performed the cradle ceremony of Rakhi, Sujata's daughter? I sometimes wonder at the universe's ways of bringing people into our lives.

Another dear friend from Assam was Anu Dhar. She was a Kashmiri Pandit and her husband was the legal advisor for



Mr. and Mrs. GLN Ayya

the tea estates in Assam. During the Kashmir riots, the government had allotted lands for the Kashmiri Pandits in Dehradun. We had become so fond of each other that she built a house for herself in half of the land allotted to her and said that we should move to Dehradun after retirement and build a house on the other half! When we were stationed in Delhi, we visited her in Dehradun many times. But as our children grew up and settled in Bangalore, we too decided to settle there. We were there for each other without any expectations and I think that was the biggest blessing of our times.

It was this quality that also brought many of us together during the Assam floods. Many houses were washed away. I remember how we friends got together and made *khichdi* for the flood victims, provided first aid, administered injections etc. All my summer camp learnings from my childhood came in handy.

Motherhood

My first-born Sharada was a healthy, quiet baby. But that she did not walk until two years of age worried everyone in the house. We later found out that it was due to sheer laziness. She did not like to move at all! We always had dogs at home and all were named Mickey - all were Labradors except for one which was a Golden Retriever. If she wanted a ball that had rolled away, she would ask Mickey to get it for her, but Mickey was even lazier and didn't budge! In contrast to this my second born, Shekhar was very naughty and just the opposite of Sharada. He was running when he was 10 months old! His metabolism was very good, but he looked thin. People thought that I was feeding Sharada more but was not feeding my son enough! It



Sujata in front of the Digboi Hospital where she was born in 1966



Shekhar, Sharada and Sujata at Bungalow F-28, 1981

born; he said the same order (girl-boy-girl) like in his family would follow. His words came true and the same order continued: then Lalitha-Visvanath-Pramila; now Sharada-Shekhar-Sujata. I came home three days after the delivery as Sharada was coming home for the summer vacation.

More than Helpers

When life gives us the opportunity to support someone, guide them or help them in any way, we should never miss the chance. I am grateful that I was able to. These people were also an integral part of my support system in Assam.

was the opposite. Shekhar loved eating. Once Sharada had asked me for sandwiches, but Shekhar came to the kitchen and ate everything before it reached her. Little Sharada didn't mind and was waiting patiently for her sandwich! Shekhar took the last sandwich and ran to the garden and planted it! He made Sharada believe that it would later grow into a "sandwich tree" from which they can pluck and eat sandwiches any time!

While Sharada and Shekhar were born in Bombay, Sujata was born in the Digboi hospital. Prior to the delivery I stayed with Shobhana Ranade in Digboi as Visvanath felt it would be too risky to travel on the jungle road from Duliajan when I went into labour. Visvanath was sure that a baby girl would be



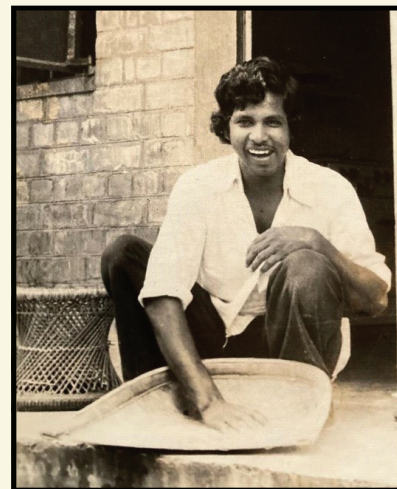
Sujata with household helpers

The government had given employees of Oil India certain luxuries. One such was the launderers (Dhobi) who would wash and iron our clothes. The dhobi allotted to our family had four sons. Washing clothes was what they'd been doing for generations. So he was a little upset when his youngest son refused to do this work. The worried father came to me and asked for advice. The youngest son was just around seven years old then. I asked him if he wished to study instead. Both he and his cousin came home to study. Both passed school, joined college and today the Dhobi's son is an Advocate in Duliajan and also runs a modern laundry unit. His cousin is a Magistrate. Recently when I had gone to Assam, both of them came to meet me and asked me to come to their laundry shop and bless them. Their children are also well educated and work in the IT sector.

Thul Bahadur was our cook in Digboi and came with us to Duliajan when we moved there. Hailing from Nepal, he did not like it much in Duliajan and wanted to return to his hometown. Although he had grown fond of us his heart was not here. I told him I will let him go on one condition, if he gives his contact address in Nepal to us. He agreed to give it to me on the condition that we visit him sometime. We kept our promise. We visited him and how happy he was!

Madan Lal helped in cleaning the house when we were in Duliajan. He had a fascination for the English language, read newspapers and always talked about going abroad. Well, he did! He went to Germany and when he came back after three years, he visited us with chocolates for the kids. It was heartwarming to see him as a polished gentleman in a suit and speaking flawless English. Sometimes the smallest encouragement that we give to people's dreams matters a lot.

Joga Rao was a young boy from Akkupalli, Andhra Pradesh who joined us as a cook. He along with his wife and three children stayed in the quarters provided for them. While he was willing to educate his sons, he wanted to send his daughter back to the village, where his parents lived, since according to him, she was going to be married off in a few years. I insisted that he educate his daughter also, and he agreed. After studying in Hindi



Joga Rao



*Chalmawii with Shalini
(Pramila's daughter)*

medium until 10th grade, Madhuri (his daughter) completed her B.Ed and worked in a primary school as a teacher. During his stay in Assam with us, he contracted tuberculosis. The company asked us to let him go and hire another cook. I refused. I made him stay in isolation in the quarters for over a year. I managed to cook on my own for another year with a little help from his wife. I took him every week to the government TB treatment centre and after he was cured he rejoined duty. Today his sons are in the Indian army, well settled and have built houses in Akkupalli for the entire family. To this day, Joga Rao tells me that because of me his family prospered. But I would like to think about it differently. I was given an opportunity that not everyone gets, to help somebody, and I am glad I did.

Living away from home, to manage three kids would not have been possible without the help of Chalmawii, my help from Mizoram. She belonged to the Lushai tribe. Children bonded well with her. Working for a British family, she knew and spoke English very well. I later came to know that the tribals converse in English rather than in their own language. She could also speak Hindi fluently. Abandoned by her son

after her husband died, she found work in our house. She was given separate quarters and never went to her village on vacation. She was very fond of Sujata, did her work with utmost sincerity and helped me raise my children. Sharada used to get very annoyed by the special attention that Sujata received! She worked hard until the age of 74.

When the children grew up, they had to be put in school, that is when we had to face some hiccups. We never had a proper school in Duliajan, not even a nursery school. So both Sharada and Shekhar were sent to Rishi Valley, a boarding school in Andhra Pradesh. If there was something that pained me, it was that children had to go far away to study and we never got to see small children playing around in our gardens. It was a childless society and that led me to think of starting a school in Duliajan.



Tiny Tots Inauguration, 1967

From a Homemaker to a Change Maker

The teacher training that I had undergone during my school days came in handy when I decided to start a nursery school in Duliajan and in the year 1967, Tiny Tots was born. Sometimes it is required for us to be the change that we want to be. The school that I started under a tree with just one child, today is a reputed nursery school in Duliajan with beautiful buildings and a strength of 750 students. I was recently invited for the 50th year celebrations. It was a surreal moment to see the tree under which I started the school. I was truly honoured that they thought of me. I am immensely grateful to all the right people that came into my life at the right time.



Ratnamala, Kamala and Usha at Tiny Tots Golden Jubilee

Kamala Ratnam was one such person. There was no salary given for teaching and helping in the school, still Kamala offered a helping hand. We ran the school for about two months under the tree. Kamala's husband later gave us permission to use the "bamboo hut" that was not in use any more to have our classes. Slowly children started coming in. We then hired an ayah to help us. Her salary was just Rs. 5 a month! The school hours were from 6.30 am to 11 am. However, the school work (i.e. administration, correcting homework etc.) required me to stay in school most of the

time. I was able to give my heart and soul to the school, teaching and taking care of children because I had no pressure at home. Visvanath liked to see me occupied and doing something productive. This is how he was all throughout. Even later in life when he was sick and had to undergo dialysis, he would urge me not to brood and instead teach in the school for visually impaired children. That is how I learnt Braille.

Another important person who joined me in Tiny Tots was Ratnamala Rao (Rao uncle's daughter). In the year 1968, Visvanath was transferred to Delhi and I had to hand over the school to Moirina Ramchandani, who took over for the next four years, managing amazingly well.

When we were transferred back to Duliajan in 1972, I took over from Moirina who was then transferred to Delhi. The school provided a solid foundation to many children in Duliajan and the nearby tea gardens. Lanku alias Dr. Siddharth Laskar, from the first batch of our students, is a famous oncologist in Mumbai. He discovered medicine for a rare type of cancer. Eighty percent of students who were with us today are abroad and doing very well. For me as a teacher, it is gratifying that my students still remember me. I still get Mother's Day wishes and calls for my birthday. What else does one want in life? I am happy that I could touch a few lives.

Of my three children only Sujata went to Tiny Tots.

My years in Assam also gave me an opportunity to interact with people who did a lot of social work, that changed my perspective towards life and urged me in that direction. There were no temples as such in Assam. They had something called the "Namghar" that had four walls and there was a mirror instead of a deity inside. The person who visited the namghar saw his reflection in the mirror. I later learnt that this signified that the Almighty was there in each one of us. But with colonisation there were a lot of conversions that had taken place. Religious organisations were educating the tribal children and leading them to a better future, away from poverty, which was the main reason to embrace conversions. Two swaminis from the Ramakrishna Mutt in Deomali would come to Duliajan every month to buy provisions from the OIL market. They stayed overnight at our place. So when they visited Duliajan we used to have an evening of bhajans and the Ladies Club members would knit sweaters and shawls for the tribal children and swaminis in the Mutt.

The Ladies Club was a good meeting point and brought us all together. As there were no hotels or posh restaurants in Duliajan those days, ladies exchanged and learnt new recipes from one another. Mrs. Mehta (a Ladies Club member) compiled all the recipes into a cookery book, which was edited (she was also the official taster!) by my daughter Sharada.

Delhi Days (1968 - 1972)

By the time Sujata was two years old, both Sharada and Shekhar were in Rishi Valley School. So when Visvanath was transferred to Delhi, Sujata came with us and went to school in Delhi for a few years. Coincidentally, that too was called Tiny Tots. Sharada had some dental issues for which she needed treatment. Rishi Valley gave her permission to study in Delhi for a year and later she rejoined her class. It was a different experience for Sharada to study in a school where socially elite kids went to. She initially found it difficult adjusting to the new environment, studies (especially Math) and the concept of exams (Rishi Valley did not have any exams). Thanks to Kaka, who patiently coached her in Math and ensured that she was able to cope.

I made good use of the time I was in Delhi. I enrolled in a Food Preservative course that taught us to make jam, sauce etc. The classes used to be from Monday to Friday. Since I was able to drive, I would drop my husband to his office and attend my course. Driving is a very important skill as it makes you independent. I learnt how to drive in Waltair from my father-in-law's driver Dhanayya. He knew only Telugu and I somehow used to try and understand what he was saying. If there was someone who was very proud of my driving skills, it was my sister-in-law Pramila. She was in college at that time. She once asked me to come and pick her up from the college. When I told her that I still had not mastered driving, she simply said, "Ask Dhanayya to drive and when you come near the college just take over. I want to show off to my friends that my sister-in-law can drive really well." What I didn't know was that she had told the entire class and all of them were sitting on the stairs and waving out to me. I was excited too and waved back at them. The helpless Dhanayya said "wodhu madam" (meaning don't do it, in Telugu). But I didn't understand Telugu and in Kannada "wodhu" meant kick! So I thought he was asking me to push the accelerator hard and I did just that. The car crashed into a pillar! Luckily, except for one of the headlights that was broken there were no major damages. I was

terrified that my father-in-law would get angry and wouldn't allow me to touch the car again. I went home and apologised to him, but to my surprise he simply said, "accidents like these happen, but that should not stop you from driving." He was a practical man with a heart of gold.

Teeth of Gold

Those days Duliajan was a laidback colony. So if there was anything major, be it a medical condition or getting supplies for the school, it had to be from cities like Mumbai or Delhi. I used to get my supplies for the school like boards, notebooks, toys for the preschool from Mumbai. Just a few weeks before going to Delhi, I had a dental issue. We had to wait until we moved to Delhi. During my morning walks I was on the lookout for a dentist and found one. I decided to consult him on the same day. Kaka and Ayi were a little apprehensive about me wanting to go without checking his credentials, but I had already waited long enough and just wanted to get rid of the pain. The dentist examined my teeth and said that the molars will have to be extracted and he will have to put artificial teeth. There were two options, ceramic or gold. Yes! You heard me right. GOLD.

He went on to explain the charges for the same. During our wedding people had gifted us gold sovereigns. So I told the dentist that I would give the gold to make the dental fixtures. When I went back home and told them this, the elders weren't happy. What if he cheats you and takes away the gold? But I trusted the dentist and six gold teeth were fixed and I had no dental problems during our remaining years in Duliajan.

It was only later when I came to Bangalore after Visvanath's retirement that I went to see a dentist again. He was very surprised to see teeth made of pure gold! The dentist had not cheated me after all! When that was removed, I used it to make a chain for my son. Can one imagine doing something like this now? We trusted people wholeheartedly and they kept the trust too.

Small Deeds go a Long Way

When we came back to Duliajan from Delhi, I got busy with the school work again. Sujata also joined Rishi Valley. There were many bachelors that had come from different places in India to work for Oil India. There was a practice that we

followed in our home. Every Sunday was an open dosa day, when I would make Masala Dosas for all those who came in. We expected people all through the day. Some called and informed us earlier, others would drop in sometimes for lunch or even dinner to have a Masala Dosa! We did it out of sheer joy of feeding people. This practice continued even when we went to Delhi. One among those who would come to our house was Yunus, a bachelor from Patna. Once Visvanath and I had a stopover in Patna. Yunus had written to his parents saying that they should host us in their house. We were deeply touched that the entire family cooked and ate only vegetarian food on the days we stayed with them. All of us ate together. It was a memorable experience.

Father Joy was with the St. Xavier's church in Duliajan. Seeing how Tiny Tots was flourishing he approached me and requested me to help start a school. I readily agreed and even taught there for about 6 months. Today it's a big school in Duliajan. When Tiny Tots had invited me for the 50th anniversary function, Father Joy came to know of it and had come to the airport to receive me. He also came to see me off at the airport. When I told him not to strain himself, he simply said "You have done so much for us, this is nothing."

People who worked in Oil India came from different states and cities, but there was a bond that had developed between all of us that still connects us. The families are still in touch and make it a point to meet each other when we happen to visit each other's places. Yunus is over 90 years old now, but when I went to Mumbai recently, he wanted to meet me. Knowing he won't be able to travel, his daughter arranged for a pickup for me to visit him. He was so happy. It saddens me when people tell me that the bond between families of colleagues is not as good as it was during those days.

Visvanath was respected among his colleagues, firstly for the wonderful contributions that he had made to the oil industry and secondly for his helpful nature. I sometimes feel it must have come from witnessing how his parents were. Just like how my father-in-law used to bring people who were stranded at the Waltair railway station home and provide them food and stay, Visvanath would bring people who had come to visit the plant in Assam but had no place to stay. Those who stayed with us gave us their contact details.

Visvanath's contribution to the oil industry was immense. He was commissioned to write a book to commemorate the centenary year of oil discovery in India. His book titled "A Hundred Years of Oil" is a narrative account of the search for oil in India and is widely referred to in India and abroad. Despite failing health, he wrote five books post retirement. He was dialysis-dependent from the end of 2005. In 2008 we got the shocking news of Shekhar's sudden demise and that made him morose and withdrawn. He tried to put on a brave front, but often I'd hear him sobbing at night. He passed away on 7th December 2010.

Visvanath believed that education empowers the future generation. So an annual scholarship has been instituted in Visvanath's name to a deserving M.Sc Geology student at the Dibrugarh University. Oil India in honour of his services organises a series of Memorial Lectures every year.

Marriages of My Three Children

Sharada was at the marriageable age and we had started looking for a suitable boy for her. She was in a working women's hostel in Bangalore; Visvanath had gone on an official visit to Indonesia and I had gone to Bangalore to consider prospective alliances. Since Kaka had a house in Bangalore, I had planned to stay there, but unfortunately there were other relatives who were staying there and Kaka had gone to Pune, so I had to look for a hotel. Since I was in Bangalore, I had taken contact numbers of our friends who had stayed with us in Assam and phoned them up. One of them came to the hotel where I had decided to stay, picked us up and took us to their house. They even insisted we have



At Dibrugarh University

the engagement done in their place. But my son-in-law (to be), a Marine Engineer, had bought a new house and the engagement took place there in 1981 on Vijayadashami day. My husband came from Indonesia at the time of engagement and friends in Bangalore helped with all the arrangements. The wedding took place a year later, on Vijayadashami day in 1982. They have a son Avinash and two grandsons.



Sharada and Prahlad October 27th, 1982



Shekhar and Jyoti April 16th, 1990

Both Shekhar and Sujata chose their own partners and

their weddings were conducted in the Arya Samaj style. The Arya Samaj wedding rites originate from the Vedas. They are devoid of idol worship. The rituals not only bind the groom and the bride in the marital bond of mutual love and respect for each other but also lay down a code of conduct towards the family and society of which they are an integral part. Every phase of the ceremony is infused with symbolic meaning and spiritual significance.

Shekhar, who was working for the Taj Group of hotels, met the love of his life, Jyoti at the Taj Mumbai and he brought her home when they were both posted in Bangalore. The girl's parents lived in Delhi and she was the youngest of the three sisters. The wedding took place in Delhi and all our friends from Assam who had settled in Delhi offered a helping hand. Our relatives from Bombay and Bangalore stayed with the Metres (the

Maharashtrian family from Digboi). The wedding took place in a hall in Defence Colony followed by a reception at the Defence Club. We also had a reception in Bangalore for our friends and relatives. Shekhar and Jyoti stayed with us in Bangalore. Both Jyoti and Shekhar were busy on weekdays, but on Sundays they took over the household and it was a rest day for me and Visvanath. Shekhar used to go and buy vegetables, plan the entire day's menu and cook for all of us. Jyoti learnt to cook vegetarian dishes and learnt Kannada too. She has a Masters degree in Epidemiology and a certified pilot's licence. She is also a member of the MENSA club (people with over 160 IQ), teaches Yoga, paints and has authored two Mills and Boon books. They have two boys, Dhruv and Jay (Dhananjay).

After a few years Shekhar joined HSBC bank and was transferred every two years. Shekhar had acquired a good habit from his father. When they were away from home, they used to write a letter every day to me, just to let me know that all is well with them. With the advent of phones/mobiles, the letters stopped but they used to call me every day. The last call that came to me from Shekhar was from London. They had moved to London and he called me at 9 '0 clock in the night for a general chit chat. He sounded excited about the coveted centre-court Wimbledon match that he had bought tickets for and spoke about their plan to visit us later in the year. But God willed otherwise; he passed away due to a myocardial infarction the same night. His passing away left the entire family shaken. Visvanath had been on dialysis twice a week since September 2005. While we wanted to go and see our son's body for the last time, we could not owing to my husband's failing health. Sharada and Sujata went to London for my son's last rites. The family then moved to Delhi after the tragedy.

Sujata met Sharad in Pune. He was her senior in college. After her B.Sc, she did her Masters in Biotech and wanted to do her PhD. The families thought that she could pursue her



Sujata and Sharad January 18th, 1993

PhD after the wedding, but she felt that it would be a huge distraction. Sharad was willing to wait. Meanwhile he had got a job in Bangalore. Sujata finished her PhD from CFTRI in Mysore after which they got married. Today, both are successfully managing Praras Biosciences. They have two children - Rakhi and Vikram.

A Collage of Memories

Assam gave us wonderful friends and beautiful memories for life...



Sawants, Ratnams, Vasudevans, Visvanaths and G.L. Vishwanath (Vishu)



Moiina and Kishoo Ramchandani



The Metres with Usha, Sujata (on her lap) and a few friends in Defence Colony, New Delhi



With the Ayyas at her 80th birthday, 2017



Kamala and Chudamani Ratnam



Tiny Tots at 50 years



Tiny Tots Celebrations 2017



Ratnamala, Mrs Mehta and Usha, 2017



Tiny Tots, 2024



Vishu, Nalini, Rinky and Mukul – all from Duliajan

International Trips

Both Visvanath and I travelled extensively whenever we got a chance to do so. When he was in service, we visited many countries, like Germany, France and Italy. When in France my husband told me to travel with a map around the city since he was busy with his work. I could speak French considerably well, and hence I enjoyed the trip. When in Rome, we visited the Vatican, and sipped wine and bread that was offered to us by the Pope. We didn't feel any different visiting the Vatican since we were used to visiting the churches in Bombay. There used to be a Wednesday prayer in the church where all were welcome. In some of these travels, I witnessed humanity at its best.

My husband was quite popular among the kids in Assam, he taught them sports, to sing songs in French and sometimes played with them. From a song, the children picked up the word *Chien* and used to address him like that. Chien means dog in French. I once asked my husband, "Why are you not correcting the children when you know what the word means?" He simply said, "They all are innocent and associate the song, the word with me and call me Chien. Why should I be upset about it? Just let it go." He never got angry. Even today the boys who are now grown-up men, when they talk about my husband, they address him as Chien.

Ravi was one such person. He addressed me as Usha Tai. He lived in the US then. Those days, we could book tickets to the places we wanted to visit in the US from India and were issued coupons. My husband and I decided to stay in downtown hotels and go sightseeing. In places where we had relatives like my sister-in-law, we stayed with them. Ravi happened to find out that we were touring the US and invited us home to stay with him, on one condition that I had to make Masala Dosas for him! He even took us from his place to Michigan, where my sister-in-law lived. We wanted to visit Disneyland too. However, we knew it cannot be seen in a day and had to look for a hotel downtown. But we were surprised when we were met by Ravi's friend who vacated his room for us. He even got us tickets for the next day's trip to Disneyland. There was no need for him to do this for us. He did it for Ravi and Ravi did it out of the love he had for us.

The Grand Canyon was another place that my husband enjoyed mainly because of the different types of rock formations.

The geologist in him was very happy when we found out that we had an extra coupon and he decided to use it to tour the Grand Canyon again.

Las Vegas came alive at night. We had retired to bed around 9.30 pm in the downtown hotel when the manager came and banged at our door. We initially thought it could be someone who had come to rob us, but the manager assured us it was him and asked us to step out and see the place. It was amazingly well lit! We had kept aside \$100 to gamble. How can we not experience gambling when in Vegas? But the only thing that we could do with that was play in the slot machine and we managed to win some extra dollars too. It truly is addictive, for when we went back to the airport, we saw another slot machine, decided to try our luck, used up the money and lost it all. That was greed! But I got a culture shock when in Las Vegas there were women going around topless, serving drinks in a tray, which also was a part of our ticket! The food and drinks were free. Even though we toured the world, my husband and I were particular about knowing our own country too. I also had the opportunity to see many places in India and its rich cultural heritage.

Moving to Bangalore

Visvanath retired in 1986 and we decided to move to Bangalore. I handed over the school and its management to a Brigadier's wife, since the place was taken over by the army during the Assam agitation. Everything was under the control of the army officers and sometimes, their wives too, as in the school's case. The teachers did not like it much under her management, but we were in the process of shifting to Bangalore and I no longer had a say in matters concerning the school. However, Tiny Tots was given back to the locals after a few years and today it stands strong and proud in the land that was given by Oil India. I am happy that I was given a chance by the Universe to be a part of something beautiful.

Chapter 4: Retirement in Bangalore

Once a Mumbaikar, always a Mumbaikar. It was true when it came to me. Initially, I did not like Bangalore. My childhood was in Bombay and I had a beautiful life in Assam, so again a new city was not so exciting. But I think if we go with an open mind, the city embraces you as much as you want it to. That is what happened with us.

My husband's relatives lived in Bangalore. We stayed with them for over a year and then moved to our own house that we built in Yelahanka. Why Yelahanka of all places you may ask? Well, it was because of our friend Vasudevan. Vasudevan was a man of action, a quick decision maker. A very close friend and colleague of Visvanath. They worked together in Assam. In fact there were two more. Sawant, a very jolly person, and Ratnam an intellectual like Visvanath. The four families had grown very close during our stay in Assam. Each one looked out for the other in times of need. Vasudevan's sons also went to Rishi Valley School along with our children. Vasudevan's wife had not visited Rishi Valley even once. When asked she would simply say, "Usha just visited the children and she gave me the updates." Such was the trust they had in us.



The Quartet: Sawant, Ratnam, Visvanath and Vasudevan

Vasudevan and family had once gone on a vacation to Bangalore and loved the place. They bought a piece of land in Yelahanka hoping to settle down in Bangalore after retirement. Vasudevan got a plot for us also in the same place, for Rs.100 (this was in the late 70s). We kept the land but they sold theirs. When we moved to Bangalore after retirement, we built a house on that land in Yelahanka and called it *Nahor* (a flowering tree in Assam).

Necessity is the Mother of Invention

Yelahanka was not well developed like what it is today. There were only about six to eight houses in the colony we lived in. Among them was a Tamilian family. They had invited us for lunch on their son's first birthday. The same day around 5 pm, two people with a gun walked into their house and robbed the family. They held the one-year-old in hand and threatened the family to give everything that they had. They even cut the grandma's ear and took away her diamond earrings. Since all the houses were not close enough, none of us could hear them scream for help. It was a sad, shocking and dangerous encounter with the dacoits.

This incident led us to form the Night Vigil team. All the men in the colony took turns to go out on the streets between 10 and 11pm and asked the residents to stay safe indoors. The local police helped us by giving us a Jeep. It was decided that when residents were in danger/under threat, they would flash a torchlight and also make loud noises by hitting plates with ladles/spoons so that the night vigil team could respond to the distress call. This was how we all came together forming various teams that addressed and helped the residents of the colony.

I was the President of the Citizen's Forum - Women's Wing. The Women's Wing focused on raising funds to help the needy. The skills of the women in our colony (like making savoury, sweets, embroidery, dolls etc.) were put to good use, and by the end of the year we put up stalls in flea markets where people could buy our products. The money collected was used to help the needy for education, healthcare, providing food/new clothes for orphanages and old age homes.



Nahor, Yelahanka

The residents came up with the “Street Captains” concept. The people in the corner houses on every street were appointed as the street captains to whom issues were reported - like a leaking pipe, a clogged drain, a dangerous pothole, a loose electricity cable, collection of garbage etc. The street captain then used to talk to the respective department and get it fixed. This proved to be a very useful idea as all our problems were sorted out in a smooth manner. The Street Captains concept was up and running until I moved out of Yelahanka two years ago. I hear that now it has not been functioning up to the mark and they have decided to stop the same. All these forums gave us the opportunity to think beyond self and work for the greater good of the community. It is sometimes sad that people want to put themselves first and ignore

the rest.

My Association with Mathru School for the Visually Impaired Children

As children in Bombay we had the opportunity to visit a local school for the visually impaired kids and help. My father always encouraged volunteering for such causes. It humbled us and made us grateful. As the phrase goes “When one door closes the other opens.” It sometimes is amazing to see how these people are super talented in other areas. My father had arranged an orchestra for our wedding reception, which comprised of visually impaired children.

G.R.Muktha was a qualified Advocate who lived in our colony. One day a visually impaired girl was left at her doorstep. She called me to ask if I could engage the child in the mornings when she was away at work, and I did. A little later, Muktha decided to start a facility where she can help such children. About 2 kms away from my house, Muktha bought land that was used as a garbage dumping ground and built a small facility with classrooms, a hostel and a kitchen. More visually impaired children started coming in. Muktha was supported by donations coming from friends and well-wishers.



With Children of Mathru School

The children stayed there, well taken care of until they passed their SSLC and then were shifted to a government facility for their PUC.

I also used to give free tuition for the children of workers in and around the area. An annual event that took place in my house was the farewell party for the students from Mathru school. I would ask the children what they wanted to eat and prepare it for them in my place. My other tuition students also joined in serving them and giving them a lovely farewell. After lunch we played games, antakshari etc. for a while and then they went back to the hostel. It is amazing to see how children still remember these small gestures. The first girl who came to Mathru school today is a PhD scholar and is working in Mysore. I did the little that I could by helping them with donations, connecting them to my network in Assam (Oil India). I also taught the children in the school and they loved my innovative way of teaching. The children

who go on to study further, later support the facility that gave them wings in whatever way they can.

As the school was running short of teachers who knew Braille, the school has now stopped taking visually impaired kids and are taking care of physically challenged children. I am happy that I was able to do my bit for the school while I was in Yelahanka. The Mathru School organised a farewell meeting to honour me for my contribution and support when I was shifting to South Bangalore.



Farewell lunch for 10th standard students from Mathru School at Nahor, Yelahanka

Arsikere Ashram

Ayi was a great inspiration for me to volunteer with the Kasturba Trust. That is how my association with Padma Bhushan Shobhana Ranade continued (she was earlier in Digboi). The central division was located in Indore and she was heading the entire south division of the Kasturba Trust that aimed at empowering women. Since I had moved back to Bangalore, she contacted me asking if I could take care of the Arsikere Ashram in Hassan District. With the support of the local politicians and my network, we were able to do some meaningful work in the Ashram empowering abandoned girl children. Working in collaboration with the child welfare associations, these girls are brought to the ashram where they are given good education, taught vocational skills so that they can manage independently later in life. The ashram today stands on the land that was donated by a social worker. A good auditorium is also a part of the ashram, which the public can hire to host functions, which in turn generates income for the ashram.

What was weird was that we had people coming in claiming to be the parents of the girls once they came to know that they were well taken care of. However, we never sent anybody with them due to lack of proof. I was an active participant in the ashram activities until the age of 83. I would travel by train or taxi to and from Arsikere. With age catching up I passed on the responsibility to my sister Shobha, who adeptly handled the activities of the ashram till recently.



At Arsikere with Shobha



Arsikere Ashram

The Old Boys' Association

Visvanath and his colleagues from Oil India in Assam were worried that they might lose touch after retirement. The close bond that had formed between the friends was too precious to be lost.

Hence my husband and his friends started the Old Boys' Association (OBA) with the intention of meeting at least once a year in a common place. The meeting usually had an agenda and a talk by some eminent personality in a niche field. A membership fee was charged to join the Association and the money was utilised to arrange food and accommodation for the attendees. The funds collected during the meeting were utilised to pay the speaker and the rest was given as charity. This was started for the Oil India employees.

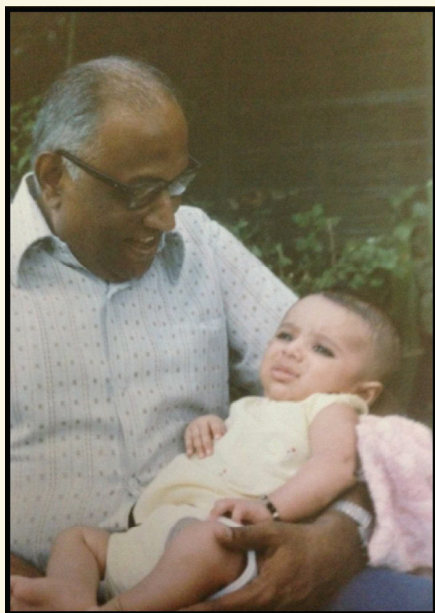
Oil India is now a PSU (Public Sector Undertaking) and the retirees get good pensions, yet not everyone is willing to be a part of an Association like this. I am told that the families are not as close as they used to be earlier. I somehow feel the olden days were indeed golden where we did not have many distractions like what we have today, and we always wanted to go and meet people to form a connection. Technology, though a boon from one angle, is a bane from the human angle.



OBA Hosted at Mathru School, Yelahanka

When Parents Become Grandparents Something Magical Happens

Avinash (Sharada's son) made us grandparents. He was born in Duliajan. A 4.2 kg baby, he was the apple of Visvanath's eye! He was a very well behaved, happy child. My husband adored him and told him many stories. He always put others first, right from a young age. He used to come and stay with us during his vacations. I remember making chaklis for him. He would run to me and ask if he could go and give the chaklis to his friends and others, after which he would take one for himself. It amazed us that he could be so selfless at that young age.



*Visvanath looks at his first grandson
with awe*

Everybody loved him. When he was all of five years old, the folks in his Karate camp had decided to go on a trek. Since Avinash was a well-behaved kid, the team offered to take him with them for the camp. He had a stuffed toy, a rabbit that he was very fond of. He carried it with him on the condition that the rabbit will also be properly taken care of. We later came to know from his instructor that the rabbit had gone missing the next morning and Avinash refused to budge unless he got his rabbit back. Fortunately, they found it in the cook's tent. When others in the camp were discussing how the rabbit could have gone there, Avinash had a simple answer, "he must've felt hungry and wanted some uppit!" Even when they had to cross a stream, Avinash made sure that his rabbit was well protected. To him the rabbit was real and it was his responsibility to take care of it. He amazed us with his caring nature.

Dhruv and Jay (Dhananjay) Shekhar and Jyoti's children were born in Delhi and visited us in Yelahanka during their vacations. Jay had Shekhar's naughtiness in him while Dhruv was a quiet kid. They loved playing in the garden at our home in Yelahanka and listened to a lot of stories from Visvanath. Even today, Dhruv and Jay love the

Anna and Saaru that I make. Dhruv is into music and was ranked in the Top 30 under 30 guitarists. He makes us proud with his extraordinary music skills. After his concerts, Dhruv used to bring a lot of friends home and I have fond

memories of making Masala Dosas for all of them. Jay works as a Media Consultant and is based in Singapore.

Rakhi (Sujata's daughter), being the only granddaughter she was treated like a princess. Visvanath always advised the boys to give her the first preference for anything. So her cousins always handled her gently.

Vikram (Sujata's son) - if there is something I remember about him it is how helpful he was as a child and always volunteered to help others even while playing with his friends.

I am truly happy to see that all my grandchildren are empathetic, helpful and creative. Every one of them has accompanied me sometime or the other to Mathru school for the visually impaired children. Dhruv used to entertain the children with his music; during summer holidays Avinash introduced the children to computers in the school. All of them were excited to attend Avinash's wedding.



Grandchildren 2002 and 2017

Great Grandchildren

It's a true blessing to be able to play and spend time with one's great grandchildren (Avinash's sons). I am doubly blessed with Rishaan (10) and Pavan (2). I can already see that Rishaan will be a proper gentleman when he grows up given his dressing sense and the way he interacts with people. He is very fond of plants and has his own garden. I am



*Mahjong with Family
(Clockwise: Sharada, Rohini, Swetha, Usha and Sujata)*

very proud of him. Pavan and I connect over the food we eat! Soup. We had our own soup time bonding when he had come here to spend time with us. As people grow old they become like children, maybe that's why we bonded very well.

The Room above the Garage

Our house in Yelahanka had a small garage, above which there was a single room. Visvanath's brother-in-law Seshadri asked us if we were willing to rent the place to him. At that time Kaka and Ayi were also staying with us. Seshadri, Kaka and Ayi kept each other good company. He usually ate with us in our house. We created some wonderful memories together. After Seshadri's demise, we decided to rent out the room to bachelors.



The Visvanaths at Nahor, 2017

From 2005 to 2016 we had about 8 tenants. Most of them are now married and still keep in touch with me. They call once in a while or visit me to enquire about my health. After Visvanath's demise, I lived alone in the Yelahanka house and kept the side door open in case of an emergency. One day, I suddenly developed chest pain and was having difficulty breathing. Just then a young boy entered through the side door and called out to me. I was sitting with my head down on the table, unable to move. He figured something was wrong. I somehow managed to tell him to call Shobha, take the keys from the stand and drive me to Baptist Hospital. By the time he took the car out Shobha had come and they drove me to the hospital. There I was told that I will need a heart valve replacement surgery immediately. After a few days I came to know that the boy who had come home that day was actually

the tenant's friend. He had come to ask if he could stay in his friend's room for a day or two. Luckily for me in the time of crisis he was there and he acted fast, saving my life. During my stay in Yelahanka, Shobha and her family were extremely helpful, especially when there was an emergency.

We once had a Dutch family that came over from the Netherlands to India. Referred to by my cousin, they used to leave their son Titus with us when they went to work. Titus became acquainted with Sachit and they grew pretty close. We call Sachit (Shobha's son), the first line of defence. While in Yelahanka if there was anything that I needed, Sachit would be the first one to be called. Later, whenever Titus came to India, he stayed in the room above the garage and Sachit helped him become computer savvy. Later he married Sachit's sister-in-law Nandini.

Man Proposes God Disposes

I had always thought that I would continue living in Yelahanka even after Visvanath's demise as we had lived there for almost 35 years. I had my set of friends and things to keep myself busy all through the day. But with age catching up and health issues, I realised that it was becoming very difficult for my children who were staying in South Bangalore to come and attend to me. It was a difficult decision to make, but I also knew that it is wiser to be closer to my daughters. Hence, I decided to sell Nahor, the Yelahanka house and move to South Bangalore.

Once I had made the decision, I also decided that I will not be taking anything with me from the big house in Yelahanka. There were many people who had helped me during my 35 years of stay in Yelahanka. Plumbers, electricians, gardeners, milk vendors, vegetable vendors, grocery shop owners and the like. I called and told them that I will be shifting soon



Four Generations: Usha, Sharada, Avinash and his sons

and that they can take any one item from the house free of cost. I just brought one Tulsi plant from Yelahanka to my new home.

My daughters had looked for an apartment for me in South Bangalore and had done minimum furnishing. I preferred it that way. It was not very difficult for me to get accustomed to the change. There were already a few people that I knew who lived in the same condo, but beyond that I also knew it only takes a warm smile and a “Good morning, how are you?” to get acquainted. Simple genuine efforts from us will gain long lasting relationships. Today if I don’t go for my morning walk for two consecutive days, people come home to check if everything is alright with me.

Sometimes people ask if it was difficult for me to shift from the place where I had lived for so long. Well, I believe that our lives are filled with experiences and changes that make us better people. And that there is no point in getting stuck in one place or one thought. Don’t you agree? When we willingly let go and allow life to show us the way, beautiful things unfold. Now, after coming to Cassia, I am happy to be surrounded by near and dear ones and enjoy whatever experiences life gives me. Who ever thought that I will be penning my life’s experiences as a story for you all? I believe everything happens for the good. The transition becomes easier with a little acceptance and letting go of the resistance.



Four Generations: Subbu, Rakhi, Sujata and Usha

Chapter 5: Family Traditions

Religious rituals and celebrating festivals are followed by most families around the world, which some believe in and some don't. We celebrated some festivals in our house, but always preferred to be associated with doing some good to the society in general. I wish to talk about certain things that we as a family did - not as a hard and fast rule, but very organically, that brings back memories of spending happy times together.

Never Leave an Opportunity to Upskill

Since our school days, we were taught never to waste precious time. Time was always put to good use. It was used to learn a new skill, equip one better and do something useful. Learning a new language, attending special classes, playing sports (indoor and outdoor) were all encouraged both by my parents and in-laws. Old habits die hard. Even today, I can't sit idle. If I am not learning anything new, I atleast make it a point to teach people what I have learnt. To be useful in this society in some way or the other is an important tradition we as a family follow.

Long Drives

When we were in Duliajan, on the first of every month, we took our children and went for a drive from Duliajan to Digboi, about 20 miles through a dense forest. Each one would get a Cadbury's chocolate and would enjoy eating it during the drive. I don't remember why and when we started following this ritual, but today even after 50 years, when my children recall that, I see a smile spreading across their faces. We did not have public transport back then, so we would go in our Ambassador car. The breeze on our face, the company of loved ones, small treats that kept them happy, moments like these are priceless!



The SNV family

Learning to Enjoy the Little Moments

The big picture called life is made up of tiny joyful moments. Learning to enjoy them is something we forget often. Sharada as a child loved the rain. Whenever it rained she used to go out and dance. Many parents would stop their children from doing so or ask them to come inside in a few minutes. I never did. I let her get wet and dance in the rain. Why curb the little joy that one would get by allowing that? I taught them to make paper boats to float in the drain that ran along the side of the house. Allowing simple pleasures in life I feel teaches them a bigger lesson - to learn to live in the moment. The past is history, the future is a mystery, but today is a gift. That's why we call it the present.

Open House - Atithi Devo Bhava

To serve others selflessly is something that we learnt by just observing the elders in our family. India takes pride in the "Atithi devo bhava" concept where we treat our guests like GOD. And when I say guests they are not only those who call, fix an appointment with you in advance and then show up at your house. These are people who just walk in, to spend time with you or to just visit you. Back then, no one was annoyed as to why someone came to their house unannounced. Whoever came in ate what was served or cooked for the day. We used to have a lot of bachelors who had left their hometowns and had come to Assam for employment. All of them were mostly the employees of Oil India. We all did miss home and being with our loved ones. We used to have potluck parties sometimes for which each one would bring one item. I noticed that people loved eating the Masala Dosas that I made.

We then started the "Sunday Open House" Masala Dosa tradition in our home. This was when Masala Dosas were made the entire day. Anyone could walk in and eat Masala Dosas. Some would come for breakfast, some for lunch, some at teatime and some for dinner. Some of the relationships became stronger because of the Masala Dosas! Often I meet or talk to my friends from Assam sometimes, some in different parts of India and some people (the bachelor boys then) who have settled abroad. Everyone recalls the open house day. It gave us immense pleasure to feed people. It was a small gesture, but to somebody else it meant the world. That's what matters.

Saturday Afternoon Lunch

If Sunday was open house day, Saturday was “Garden dining day.” Visvanath and I had travelled extensively and loved trying out new cuisines. Spaghetti was something that I took a liking to during our travels. Some of the British ladies knew how to cook spaghetti from scratch and taught us. We never bought or had ready to eat food then. We used all-purpose flour to make the dough, cut it into thin slices and dried it for 2 to 3 days. And then on Saturday, we used to boil it and make spaghetti. Every time a new batch was made. If we were to have the spaghetti on Saturday, then the process began on Thursday. Again, there was no hard and fast rule that it was only for our family. Sometimes our neighbours would come over. The menu was fixed. Spaghetti with some toast and finger chips. While the men enjoyed beer, women enjoyed “shandy,” a mixture of coke and beer. A happy afternoon in the midst of greenery with pleasant company gave us immense joy.

Annadaanam is Maha Daanam

I grew up seeing the elders in my family feed people. Serving the community is considered critical in a Dharmic way of life. A person can serve the society or the community by offering his time (volunteering/seva), offering his knowledge (teaching), offering money (donating), clothes or food. Of all the charities, giving food to the hungry is considered the best because the absence of food can snatch away a life. People who came to our house never went without eating. In my early days I made what I knew and also learnt to make many new dishes from friends. Sharing a few recipes for you all.

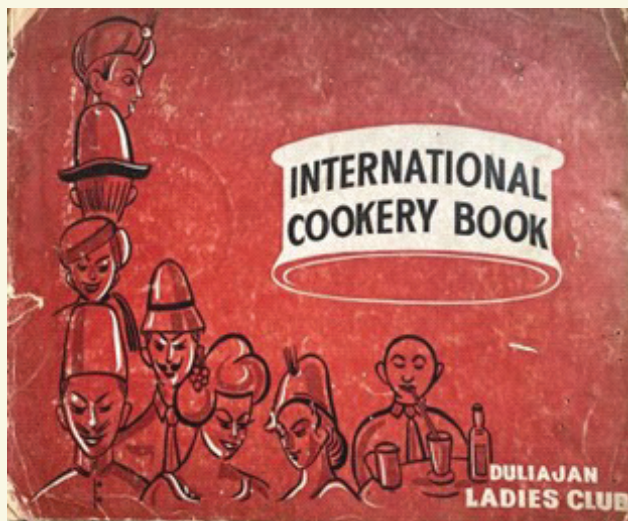
My Popular Recipes

In my heyday I was well known for making rava laddoos and sajjge. Both these items I learnt from my mother Subbu. At our monthly Ladies Club meetings in Duliajan I taught many ladies these recipes. In fact, in an International Cookery Book the recipe for rava laddoos is called “Usha’s Rava Laddoos!”

Prahlad (Sharada’s husband) used to like the rava laddoos and sajjge that I made. So, whenever he came home after his tenure on the ship, I used to prepare a fresh batch for him. He used to also tell Sharada - “no one can prepare sajjge like your mom.” So when they visited us in Yelahanka I used to make sajjge specially for him. Swetha (Sharada’s daughter-

in-law) took down the sajige recipe, but even now she says, “Aji I make it exactly how you told me. Still it’s not as good as yours.”

Andhra chutneys and pickles I learnt from Mrs. V.B. Rao and Mrs. Subramaniam in Digboi. This was mainly for my husband who liked spicy food! I used to make tomato chutney in bulk (30 kgs at a time) and distribute it in the colony, and my children would take bottles of it to boarding school too. However, with time I’ve forgotten the recipes for chutneys and pickles. I have a sweet tooth and remember only the sweet recipes!



Rava Laddoos

Ingredients

Rava (Sooji fine) – 1 cup

Sugar (powdered) – 2 cups

Ghee – 1 cup

Cashews and raisins – 1/2 cup each roasted in ghee and kept aside

Grated dry coconut (copra) – 1/2 cup (optional)

Cardamom powder according to taste

Milk – 1/2 cup (while making the laddoos)

Method

Roast rava in ghee till you get an aroma and it changes colour. Remove from stove and add powdered sugar, cashews and raisins, and grated dry coconut. Sprinkle milk on the above and shape into laddoos. Store in a cool, dry place.

Sajjge (Sooji/Rava Halwa)

Ingredients

Sooji/ Rava – 1 cup

Sugar – 1 ½ cups

Ghee – 1 cup

Milk – 1 cup

Water – 1 cup

Over ripe banana (big size) – 1

Almonds (badam) - Soak and peel about 10

Cashews and raisins – 1/4 cup each roasted in ghee and kept aside

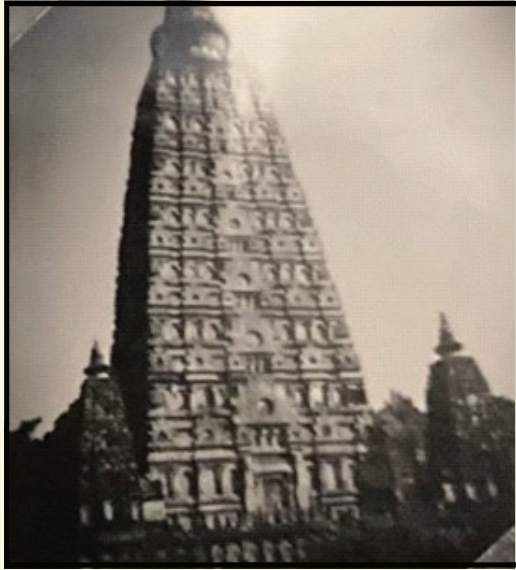
Cardamom (powdered) – 4-6

Method

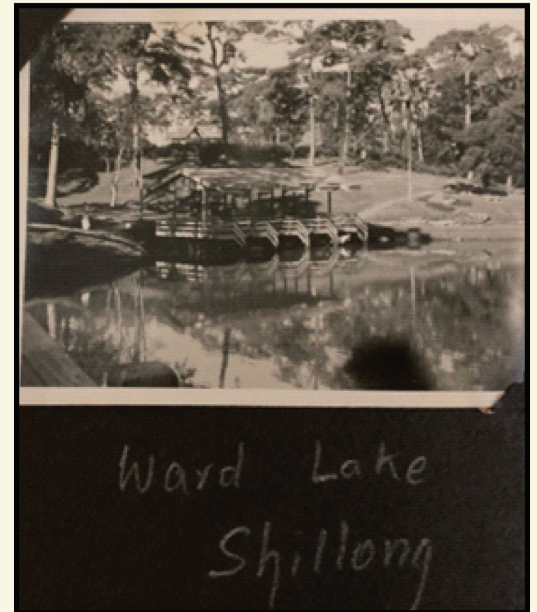
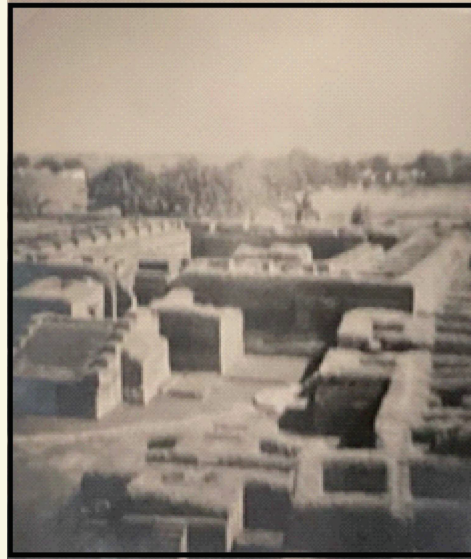
Roast sooji in ghee till it changes colour and add the mashed banana. Then add the sugar and mix with milk and water. Add peeled almonds and cashews and raisins. Serve hot with puris.

Travel and Learnings

Visvanath and I loved to travel. We made it a point to go to a new place every vacation. For us more than visiting a new place and sightseeing, to witness a new culture and learning about their traditions was exciting. Every time we planned to visit a new place we prepared ourselves by learning at least the basics of the local language. It helped immensely to connect with the local people. As much as we explored foreign countries, we explored our own country too. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Gujarat to Rajasthan, we have explored all the major places. I personally feel, travel



changes you as a person for the good. It helps you adapt to situations that throw you off guard sometimes, helps you think on your feet and enables you to understand the differences and yet appreciate the similarities. One of the best things to learn in life, isn't it?



Picnics and Social Gatherings



Picnic on the banks of the Dihing river

The families from Oil India in Duliajan frequently organised picnics mostly as a day outing. It was always amazing to mingle with people from all across India. The bond that formed was beyond any religion, caste or creed. I sometimes feel that those days were far more peaceful and people lived in harmony.

Our families took part in get-togethers and parties organised by the British, especially during Christmas when there was ballroom dancing. A British couple even offered to teach us ballroom dancing, since we would be sitting in our chairs when the other couples danced. A few couples, and that included us, were willing to learn. I have always been fascinated by other cultures and didn't want to miss this opportunity to learn ballroom dancing. From the next party we too were dancing! I always wore a saree and danced.

For some reason I never wore a new saree until someone else in the house wore it first! Even now when I get or buy a new saree my daughters wear it first or I wash it before wearing it. Probably a tradition that was passed on to me by my mother. Cotton and silk sarees have always been my preference. I remember wearing a lot of Kanjeevarams as daily wear. We never spent too much on sarees or jewellery. I remember the costliest saree that I wore even on the day of my wedding was about hundred rupees, a green tissue saree that I still have with the gold zari intact.

Once when Visvanath had gone on a trip to Bangalore, his sister had taken him to a shop and made him buy 3 sarees of the same type but different colours. One for me and two for his sisters. My sister-in-law even wrote a letter to me asking me to bring that saree every time I visited Bangalore. You may wonder what was so special about it. It was filled with pure gold zari and cost Rs. 300. The costliest saree that I had during those days! So my sister-in-law made sure that all



Usha, Sheila Sawant and Mani Vasudevan at a picnic

custom I believe was mainly to keep the relationship between the brothers and the sisters going strong even after the sisters went to a different household after their marriage. Sometimes I feel in today's world, customs, traditions and rituals are followed for the sake of following without understanding the true essence behind the same. I feel that all that matters is to understand the basis behind all of these customs.

But there were also times when I had followed certain things because the elders in the family asked us to. Like I had mentioned earlier, my father was very good at astrology. When Shekhar was born, he read his birth chart and advised me to fast on Saturdays, for Shekhar's good health. I religiously followed it, knowing my dad's understanding of astrology. However, when I asked him if there was anything to worry about, he simply said, it was for his good health. But living in Assam, on Saturdays we had to attend get-togethers and parties organised by our higher officials, so fasting became a problem. When I mentioned this to Dada, he asked me to fast on Tuesday instead. I did.

of us got to wear all three different colours whenever we were together, by rotation. The saree that I have with me today is probably my sister-in-law's, still as good as new! We indulged like this very rarely. I was also not very keen on owning jewellery. I inherited jewellery from my mother-in-law. Today I have happily given away all of that to family members. Costly sarees or jewellery do not define me as a person.

Festivals were the time when money was sent to sisters by brothers. This is practised even today in some households. Gowri habba was one such. But then over time, I saw this tradition decline in our household mainly because there were many families living in the same household and to support all of them and then spare money to send to sisters seemed impractical; and nobody complained either for the priorities were clearly set. This

But today when I think back, I feel maybe Dada was aware that Shekhar's lifespan was short and that's why he had asked me to fast. Apparently, he had shared this with my mother. But I think there are many things that are beyond our control.

When One Leaves this Earth

Rituals for the dead are given great importance in the Hindu tradition. Visvanath was not around to perform his father's rituals when my father-in-law passed away. It was done by his uncle and continued until he was alive. Visvanath decided to support his uncle's family by helping them monetarily. Similarly, when Shekhar died, we could not go for his cremation. Sujata brought back his ashes, and the immersion was done in the Kavery river at Srirangapatna. This gave us some kind of closure. But today we remember him by feeding the needy. The same we are following for my husband too. I feel it makes more sense to us than performing rituals. That does not mean I am against it, it's simply because we feel immense satisfaction by feeding the needy while remembering a lost loved one.

Chapter 6: Important days of History in my Life

I have lived through and witnessed all that you have read or probably will read about in your textbooks.

Breathing the air of Freedom

When I was young I experienced the peak of the “Freedom Movement” in India. Surrounded by people like Kaka and Ayi, the mood of the nation at that time was vibrant in our household too. What I remember the most about the 15th of August, 1947 was that we all were asked to stay safe inside our homes, as rioting was expected. The Hindu-Muslim clash was spoken about by all and evident everywhere. I remember my father ushering us inside the house along with a couple of Muslims who were running in the streets (probably being chased, I am not sure) and instructing us to remain absolutely silent for a couple of minutes. The Muslim people were given shelter in our house for a while until the situation eased. It sometimes makes me wonder, did we get freedom at all that day? We were happy to see the British return to England, but a new war had just begun. To empathise and to believe in humanity is what all the great leaders of our country followed and taught us by living examples; but in the process of achieving freedom did we lose out on that? Until then people who were living like brothers and sisters in the same locality were forced to move out from their comfort zone, giving birth to chaos and uncertainty. I want to leave you all with a question, “What does freedom mean to you?”

Queen bids Adieu

A few months after Independence, Queen Elizabeth was there in Bombay, to bid goodbye to the Indians. She went around in a “Victoria Carriage,” which was horse-driven and was designed in a colonial style. Victorias were there for a short while even after the British left and later were kept in the museum. Today, I am told there are similar, battery operated - not horse-driven carriages that can take you around the city of Mumbai.

All of us were eager to see Queen Elizabeth. The previous day we had messengers coming and giving the news and instructions about where we should stand to see the Queen. “You all are requested to come to Tilak Bridge, in Dadar,

stand in a line on the pavement to bid farewell to the Queen.” You won’t believe it if I tell you that everybody in the locality followed the instructions to the T and all of us were able to see and wave out to the Queen, without any chaos or confusion in the process. Today I cannot imagine such discipline even in cinema theatres where people push, pull and stomp over each other to get things done first or fast.

Yes, the Britishers colonised India, but one has to agree that there was a certain amount of discipline that was taught to us by the British, which our generation follows even today. I wonder what the problem is in following simple rules and being considerate to others. If only that happens, our country will be the best place to live in.

Chinese Invasion

Money, power and greed are the worst enemies of mankind. The Chinese were keen on capturing the oil wells in Assam. There was tension in Duliajan. The military had asked us to protect and manage the oil wells and were helping by providing backend support. After much discussion it was decided that the women and children would be sent to their homes and the men would stay back in Assam and protect the oil wells. As a last resort it was planned that they would burn the oil wells. I came back to Assam a month after Shekhar’s delivery, but the situation had not eased. Every household was taught how to build a trench and advised to go into hiding upon any warning. So every time we heard the warning through a siren, we would go and hide in the trenches. And after a while when things settled down we would go back home. Finally, the Chinese retreated, accepting defeat. All these experiences in life have prepared me to face any adverse situations that come my way.

Assam Agitation

You all might have read about the “Assam Agitation” in papers, heard on the radio, or read on the internet. I was one of the unfortunate ones to witness it in real life. Yes, unfortunate due to how the events unfurled. Robi Mitra was senior to my husband in rank and worked as a Geologist in Oil India. His wife Ratna came from an aristocratic and influential family. We consulted the same doctor during our pregnancies and became good friends. I would walk straight into her

house and pull her out of bed for a morning walk, upon the advice of our doctor who was worried that Ratna was not exercising enough. Our children became close friends too.

In the late 1970s there was political and linguistic unrest in Assam. They wanted all the Bengalis, and there were many in Oil India, out of their state. Some of us took part in a procession saying, “All are Indians first.” When this agitation was in full swing, Robi Mitra (a Bengali), who was second in command, called all the people and informed them not to go to the office due to the prevailing situation. Then he received a call from someone asking him to come to the hospital and see how his people were suffering. Although it was a walkable distance, Robi took his car for safety reasons. But what he didn’t know was that supari killers had been hired and were waiting for him at the hospital gate. Robi was brutally murdered. And just the previous day the Mitra family had visited us.

Ratna received a call about the murder. While Robi’s mother insisted on calling the police, Ratna decided not to as she was more concerned about the remaining members of the family. She reached out to us for help. After three days we managed to move the family to Calcutta. It was a dark day for all of us in Assam to witness such a tragedy. The family was traumatised. Recently, their daughter visited me in Bangalore and said she wanted to visit Assam. When I called up a few people and informed them about the daughter’s visit, they promised to take care of her. In fact none of these people knew her personally but had heard about Robi’s murder. They welcomed and took very good care of her. And that gives me hope that this world will one day become a better place for all of us to live in harmony.

Chapter 7: Pearls of Wisdom

Lavanya Prasad, the person who helped elicit stories from my life for this book one day asked me “Aunty if I ask you to describe yourself in one word, what would that be?” I replied, “How can I describe myself? You should ask others.” Nevertheless, that got me thinking. Recalling how I have lived my life until now, the word that came to my mind was “**Good.**” I think I can without any doubt say that I have been a good person in my life. As far as I know I haven’t caused harm/trouble to anyone knowingly and have helped as many as I can whenever possible. Both Visvanath and I stood by the motto *live and let live*.

There really is no place to end this book. It could go on and on. There are many things in my life that I have not covered or you may think I’ve forgotten to mention. If I decide to include everything then it might triple the size of this project! The idea was to bring forth the incidents in my life that would give the future generations an idea of who their ancestors were and where they come from. I have included enough information for all of you to get a glimpse of the rich lineage you come from. I truly hope this grounds you, humbles you and also creates a spark in you to go and find out more for yourself. I would like to leave you all with a few words of wisdom, if I may call it, that this beautiful life has given me.

I see many people on the lookout for “finding one’s actual purpose in life.” I feel if we simply trace the path laid out for us in our life and do anything with heart and soul, the purpose in our life will emerge and show itself to us. There are many people from my own family and others, whose ways of living have influenced me and helped me carve a path for myself. Gandhiji for example, whose interaction with me I have described in detail in the earlier chapters. His words to me “Achha Kaam Karo” was etched in my subconscious that has led me on the chosen path. Once when in Kolkata, we came to know that Mother Teresa was in town and went to see her. I was surprised that she was in the streets of Kolkata attending to the needy on the roads rather than addressing people who had come to meet her. As I was standing and watching her serve the pavement dwellers, something hit me hard. If someone from abroad could come to India and attend to the sick and needy, why can’t we? I am truly glad that I was able to serve people through teaching what I know and feeding them.

Give someone a fish, you feed them for a day. Teach someone how to fish, you feed them for a lifetime. The secret lies in empowering people.

When Visvanath took ill and was on dialysis, we had a male nurse helping us. Rocky was his name. A Malayalee boy, who developed an attachment to us. Even though he was a non-vegetarian he enjoyed what I made and was very sincere. Sometimes Visvanath and I would tell him to go out, probably to Church and have food of his choice and come home. But he would say, “Uncle is like God to me. If I do my duty here well, God will take good care of me.” Rocky and I bonded well over cricket. We used to take Visvanath once a month to the hospital for checkups. During one of the visits, the finals of a cricket match was going on, so I asked Rocky to stay back and watch the match. Rocky was reluctant, but since I insisted, he agreed. That day Visvanath passed away. Rocky was very upset that he could not be there next to him. He came for the cremation and even to Srirangapatna where the last rites were performed. He was a young hardworking boy with dreams and hopes. He took very good care of Visvanath and I recommended him to whoever needed a male nurse. A small help. Today he is the director of a caregiver’s group that provides male nurses for home care. He is married, and lives with his family in Jalahalli.

When I was admitted in Baptist Hospital, Latha was the nurse who took care of me. A very able and agile nurse, who was approaching retirement. She used to share with me her concerns about how she was going to support herself and her family after her retirement. A small push is all she needed. She brought just-retired nurses together and started her own nursing services. After Latha, another nurse Pyari from the hospital took over. And whenever I was in need of a caregiver, I relied on Pyari; as a token of gratitude she didn’t take security deposits from me. We later took this up as a Yelahanka ladies’ project. We tied up with hospitals and recommended the nursing group run by Pyari when someone had a requirement. Doing small things like these might not be big for us but it can change someone else’s life dramatically.

Life for me has been a mix of all tastes. And I have no regrets. Imagine eating only sweet dishes 24x7. Won’t you feel bored? Life also is like that. It has to be a mixture of sweet and sour, for us to become a better version of ourselves. The

Ugadi Pachadi reminds us of this. A mixture of jaggery, tamarind, raw mango and coconut; time and again it is a reminder for us to embrace life with its varied tastes. I have seen happy times and sad and depressing times too.

Many times people ask me how I was able to process the untimely death of my son. It indeed was the most painful moment in our lives. My husband was already ill and it affected him badly. He sobbed every night thinking of our son and used to feel guilty by saying that he was not letting me feel the grief since I had to step up to take care of him. Of course I wasn't okay, but what was the use of crying over a situation that couldn't be altered? I used to tell myself "Death is normal and it happens to all. Losing a son also happens to many. I had not known about it until today and I am not the only one suffering." There are many mothers like me who have lost their children to accidents or on the border fighting enemies. So there is no point in asking "why me?" I think that mindset helped me cope with the loss and view life differently.

When Visvanath was unwell, I could never sleep at night. Just a few hours before passing away, in the hospital Visvanath called me, held my hands and said, "Shekhar is at the door, he has come to take me, I will go away today. Stop worrying and sleep well." As if by magic on the day he died and ever since, I have slept really well.

If there was a quality that I retained in me from day one, it is not showing my pain both physically and emotionally to others. When I was able to handle the pain introspectively, I didn't feel the need to trouble others by expressing it. Life is much better when you start accepting things that are happening to you and understanding that change is the only constant.

To everyone who is reading this book, I wish you a world where love becomes the religion, where everyone is treated equally and everyone volunteers to help others in all ways possible.

Fame doesn't matter, money doesn't matter. Those are like nebulous clouds that will float away. I just wish that when I am long gone, my great great grandchildren can read this book and say with pride that these were my ancestors, and this is the bloodline I must carry forward. That will be my legacy.

